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The British Issue

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A. N. Wilson's Literary Life

Henry Shukman
The Venice Faxes—a story

David R. Slavitt
The Countess of Pembroke

Andrew Frisardi
The Anomaly of Edwin Muir

Alan Sullivan and Timothy Murphy
The Fire-Drake from *Beowulf*

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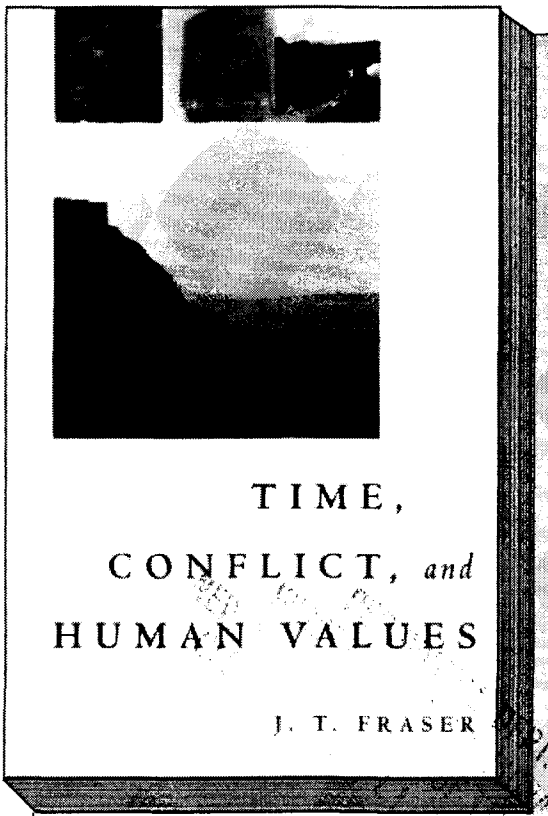

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VOLUME LII NUMBER 4 WINTER 2000

The British Issue

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TO OUR READERS

THE HUDSON REVIEW gratefully acknowledges support from The British Council for publication of the poetry in this issue.

The British Council

Two new books by Advisory Editors and one by a Contributing Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW have just been published. In accordance with our policy, they will not be reviewed in these pages but are listed below for the interest of our readers:

GARY KRIST: *Chaos Theory.* Random House. $24.00.

DAVID MASON: *The Poetry of Life and the Life of Poetry: Essays.* Story Line Press. $15.95 paperback.

BERT CARDULLO: *Practical Film Criticism: An Enlightened Approach to Moviegoing,* Volume 1. The Edwin Mellen Press. $49.95.

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State of the Arts NYSCA

Note of correction: The last line of "Nijinsky in Translation" by Marcia B. Siegel in the Autumn 1999 issue was inadvertently omitted during the final phase of production. Readers can receive an errata slip by providing a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

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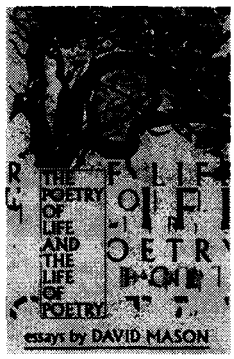

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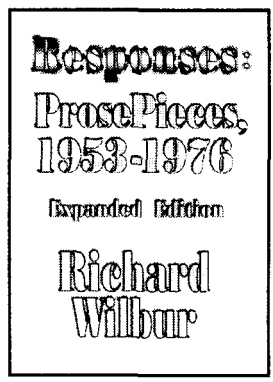

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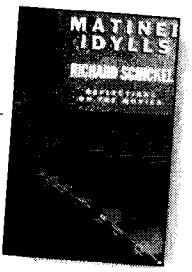

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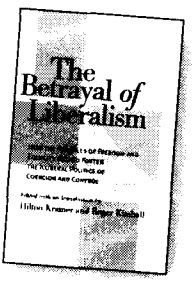

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Mr. Wilson's Literary Life

Publication of *God's Funeral*, by my count his thirtieth book, is occasion for singling out A.N. (Andrew Norman) Wilson as, if not England's foremost man of letters, surely its most prolific and entertaining one. Not yet fifty—he will become so this year—he has produced a varied and appealing series of books, beginning in 1977 with *The Sweets of Pimlico*, a novel. There have followed novels, biographies, works of religious speculation and scholarship on Jesus and Paul, a group of nineteenth-century portraits (*Eminent Victorians*), and a highly entertaining look at the royal family (*The Rise and Fall of the House of Windsor*). He has edited *The Faber Book of London* and *The Faber Book of Church and Clergy*, as well as Scott's *Ivanhoe*, with a revealing introduction and good notes. As with his precursor, Anthony Burgess, whom he resembles in comic wit, theological obsessions, and immense productivity (even in name—Burgess' given one was John Anthony Burgess Wilson), A.N. Wilson's reputation is lessened in the eyes of some by such striking productivity. (Burgess' response in the early 1960s to the charge of overproduction was to publish two novels under the pen name of Joseph Kell.) No one can be that good who writes that much, runs the logic, and ambivalence about Wilson is heightened by his willingness to say on one occasion or another all sorts of outrageous things, while moving about from Catholicism to atheism in ways that confuse a reader trying to keep track.

His most recent work, *God's Funeral*, is an immensely readable excursion through the work of a large number of literary and philosophical figures, mainly from England in the nineteenth century, who occupied themselves with what he calls in his preface "the God-question."[1] It is a question, Wilson believes, that does not go away, as it has not gone away for him. Although he

[1] GOD'S FUNERAL, by *A.N. Wilson*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. $27.95.

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admits to not being a theologian, a philosopher, or a scientist, as a man of letters he has no hesitations about taking them on—from Hume and Kant to Darwin and Baron von Hügel.[2] Wilson's method of presentation is old-fashioned: a portrait of the man (or woman); liberal use of memorable anecdotes about him; extracts from his writings of attitudes about God, religion, the church, science, etc.; then a personal un-dispassionate judgment, on the critic's part of the man's contribution and importance. He has his heroes, an eclectic collection including Newman, Swinburne, Ruskin, William James, even "funny old Herbert Spencer" who wrote "millions of words which no one now reads." For good measure there are also a couple of villains, or at least pretenders—like Matthew Arnold and G.B. Shaw. In his chapter on William James, Wilson describes the philosopher's famous style—so irritating to James's contemporary, Charles Sanders Peirce—as "an intelligible, even a chatty style, laced with amusing asides and jokes." There is no better description of Wilson's own style, not just in the new book but throughout his work.

A few facts about Wilson's life may be of interest.[3] Born in Staffordshire in 1950, he was the youngest of three children whose father was a designer of pottery, also managing director of Wedgwood. At age seven he was sent to boarding school in Wales, which he has lovingly characterized as "a crummy hateful little place," but which he has made good use of as a source for comic fiction. At thirteen he entered Rugby, then New College, Oxford, where at the end of his second year he married his tutor, Katherine Duncan-Jones, a prominent Shakespearean scholar. By that time he had already embraced and renounced more than one "faith"; in his book of religious speculation, *How Can We Know?,* he described his youthful self:

> At the time, I was very young for my fifteen or sixteen years, very impressionable and very enthusiastic. I had already been by turns, a convert to a simple sort of evangelical Christianity; an atheist; a Marxist with particular devotion to the teachings of Chairman Mao.

[2] Compare Wyndham Lewis in *Time and Western Man*: "I do not feel impelled to explain myself when I am examining a mere philosopher: he speaks my language, usually with less skill, but otherwise much the same as I do."

[3] My source here is "The Busy, *Busy* Wasp," by James Atlas (*New York Times Magazine*, October 18, 1992).

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He also fell into the grip of Tolstoy for two years, tried to practice vegetarianism, joined the Peace Pledge Union, and read the sage with devotion until he found his mind "in a new place," this one under the auspices of John Henry Newman. After taking a "bad" degree at Oxford (a second) he spent a year at a nearby theological seminary, St. Stephen's. This he accords about as much respect as he gave his Welsh boarding school, calling the seminary "a madhouse . . . a homosexual world of a particularly high-camp kind—a girls' names and feather dusters sort of world . . . It was beyond belief." Something like that school would receive memorable presentation in his second novel, *Unguarded Hours*. Wilson and Duncan-Jones had two children; he returned to the Church of England when his wife balked at raising them as Catholics. He taught a year at a public school, then lectured at New College, Oxford, a lectureship eventually not renewed. At age twenty-eight he published *The Sweets of Pimlico*, a delightful and also vaguely disturbing novel that won the John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial Prize. He became literary editor of *The Spectator*, thus launching his journalistic career; was dismissed two years later when he altered without permission some sentences by one of his reviewers; later wrote a weekly column for the *Evening Standard* and generally turned out much literary commentary. His first marriage ended in 1989; he then married Ruth Goulding, an art historian, and moved to London.

Before remarking briefly on his latest book, I want to survey Wilson's achievement as novelist, biographer, and all-purpose reviewer. We may begin by noting that he has declared George and Weedon Grossmiths' *Diary of a Nobody* the best comic novel in English. This is enough perhaps to locate Wilson's essential bourgeois pleasure in the absurdities of Mr. Pooter and his family. When you think about it (and if you have read the wonderful *Diary of a Nobody*), how many novels are in serious competition for the accolade? *Decline and Fall*, *From a View to a Death*, and *Lucky Jim* come to mind—and not surprisingly, since Wilson is a comic writer of the post-Waugh-Powell-Amis axis. His books, especially his earlier novels, don't presume to take their characters seriously, deeply, sympathetically; rather, like the Dickens who revels in "superficial" creation of character, Wilson's theatrical comedy displays the antic absurdities of types chosen for their outrageousness—like the seminarians in *Unguarded Hours*. Here is a typical

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exchange among some of these students at St. Cuthbert's, a theological college where the hapless and wholly engaging protagonist of the novel, Norman Shotover, has landed in his bid to be ordained. Father Arnold Fogg is vice-principal of the college and is referred to in the exchange that follows about "cottas," a waist-length surplice:

> "I knew Felicity Fogg would get her knickers in a twist over those cottas."
>
> "Sometimes I think she's a bloody Protestant."
>
> "Mind you, Father, I can see some of the embroidery was, shall we say, extreme?"
>
> "What's extreme about a few emblems of the Immaculate Heart of Mary?"
>
> "Temper, temper! What do you think, Sheila dear?"
>
> "I thought the cottas were quite pretty," said Norman. "A bit gaudy, perhaps, but quite pretty."

The next paragraph informs us that Norman has adapted fairly happily to life at St. Cuthbert's, though he admits that the students "had an odd way of speaking." This impression dated perhaps from his first day there when a fellow student says to him admiringly, "You really are a saucy little beast!" The running gag is uncomplicated but nonetheless amusing.

Unguarded Hours and its successor of a year later, *Kindly Light*, both featuring Norman as protagonist whirled from this escapade to that, are Wilson at his breeziest, most unguardedly inventive. *Kindly Light*, for example, begins with a mass performed by Father Sporran and his dancing nuns (the nuns are clad in "black fish-net stockings and the briefest of gym-tunics"), who sing the Beatles' "All You Need Is Love," while Father Sporran serves up communion with slices of Hovis (English all-purpose bread) and Sainsbury's Beaujolais. There are various other "modern" improvements on the Eucharist; Wilson is especially keen on travestying post-Vatican II goings-on in the Roman Catholic Church, and "satire" is hardly the word to fit the extravagance with which various awful "advances" are treated. (Wilson might say no extravagance was needed, since in themselves they constituted a travesty.) But he is equally at home in the schoolroom where Norman teaches after he flees the church and where he attempts to have his students read aloud from *Macbeth*. One of the Hassif twins, whose English is weak but whose father, a Middle East oil

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magnate, has promised to finance a new language laboratory named The Hassif Block, is being encouraged to read aloud some lines, over the protests of an obstreperous boy named Macracken:

> "Come on Hassif—Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all. As the weird women promised . . ."
> "Ooh! Weird!"
> "Macracken! That is your last chance. The next time it will be three hundred lines."
> "*Zoo harst eet naking. Cow-door Glamees . . .*"
> "Sir, he's lousy, he can't read; let me read, sir. Please, sir. I promise, I'll do it properly, sir. Honestly, sir."

And so on. Paul Pennyfeather's teaching debacle with the boys at Llanaba Castle in *Decline and Fall* is of course behind this, but Wilson provides many commendably original touches of his own.

In contrast to this "superficial" treatment of character, there are interesting moments in Wilson's early novels when he manages to take us convincingly into the mind of a protagonist who, on occasion, has or has developed over the novel an inner life. In his (for a first novel) extremely assured *The Sweets of Pimlico*, Evelyn Tradescant's love for the strange old man Theodore Gormann flowers when Theo dies at a seaside resort where Evelyn has taken him to recuperate after he falls victim to a bombing in the National Gallery: "Her inability to believe that Mr. Gormann any longer existed produced a nervous blankness which stemmed even the desire to weep." Even more convincingly, at the end of *Wise Virgin*, the blind medieval scholar Giles Fox, his affections three parts iced over, finally proposes to Louise Agar, his far-from-stunning research assistant whose devotion has proved itself on his pulses. These novels, followed by *Who Was Oswald Fish?*, *Scandal*, and *Love Unknown*, remind us in places of Iris Murdoch to whom, along with John Bayley, *The Sweets of Pimlico* was dedicated. (In this magazine a year ago I said that Wilson was writing a biography of Murdoch, but that seems to be no longer the case.) Wilson's novels however are a lot less murky and not as long as Murdoch's, also better written page by page, even while—to some readers' disappointment—less philosophically dense.

His novels usually tend toward excess in their later stages, with farce and madcap behavior taking over from more subtle comedy

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and the sort of precise observation that is given to, say, academic Oxford social life and why one academic left it behind:

> Three years was enough of it. Dinner parties at which gross quantities of ill-chosen wine washed down food that would have been regarded as penitential in a boarding-school; repeated talk of college appointments and disappointments; fog in the winter; torrid humidity in summer; water so hard that one could barely wash one's hands; constant catarrh and quarrels with the neighbors.

These sentiments from *Unguarded Hours* were ones Wilson gave the character of Gussy Mason at about the time he himself was no longer a lecturer at Oxford. But there is much similarly and strongly-directed observation in *Wise Virgin* and in more recent fiction like *The Vicar of Sorrows* and *Dream Children* (his best novel). Wilson's most ambitious, certainly most extended, piece of observed manners is to be found in the five novels that make up *The Lampitt Chronicles*, a wide-ranging portrait of English middle-class and "bohemian" life in the second half of this century. Here the precursor is Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*, and my feeling is that Wilson's chronicle, lacking the highly-wrought, wholly deliberative style that Powell perfected in those books, produces something much less memorable. Compared to Powell's hero, Nicholas Jenkins, Julian Ramsay (protagonist of *The Lampitt Chronicles*) is granted no such distinctive style, so that while the Lampitt books are filled with lively, humorous bits of mordant life, they don't stay in the mind forcefully; one doesn't think to reread them, as one does with other Wilson novels.

Astonishingly, in addition to this impressive output of fiction, he produced in the 1980s five substantial biographies, beginning with Sir Walter Scott and proceeding through Milton, Hilaire Belloc, Tolstoy, and C.S. Lewis. Each of them (except the Belloc, which I haven't been able to get through) is never less than thoroughly agreeable and informative about both its subject's life and work. In particular, the one on Scott (*The Laird of Abbotsford*) offers many fresh readings and judgments of the novels; while the exemplary one on Lewis reveals a sympathetic insight into the man, his writings, and Oxbridge life in decades past. The life-and-works approach, so central to Wilson's procedure as a biographer, is also evident in the six essays that make up *Eminent Victorians*, a handsomely illustrated presentation of Prince Albert, Charlotte

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Brontë, Gladstone, Newman, Josephine Butler, and Julia Margaret Cameron. Justifying his appropriation of Lytton Strachey's title, Wilson quotes Strachey's claim in the latter's *Eminent Victorians*: "*Je n'impose rien; je ne propose rien; j'expose*"—suggesting that in saying this Strachey had his tongue so firmly in his cheek he could barely get the words out. Wilson allows that his predecessor's book "will still be read when mine is forgotten," but he adds, rightly, that "when both Strachey and I are forgotten, they will still be reading *Jane Eyre* and Newman's *Apologia*." Let's hope so; at any rate, Wilson writes about his eminences with an engagement both shrewd and sympathetic, avoiding—as Strachey did not—making himself out to be much more knowing and clever than his subjects. He likes—and with some justice—to think of his own motive as that of befriending rather than patronizing the dead, and practices what he preaches in his book on the Victorians and in much of *God's Funeral*.

Wilson's single collection of essays and reviews is titled *Penfriends from Porlock*, and its best parts are portraits of figures many of whom are forgotten. There is a lovely one, for example, of William Ralph Inge, aka "The Gloomy Dean"; also of Montague Summers, "Peter Simple"; and the not-forgotten G.K. Chesterton. There are as well two nasty carvings-up, of Lyndon Johnson and of Sir Charles Snow. The essay on Dean Inge is an example of Wilson's "befriending" the dead: "I like his family life, the devotion to Kitty [Inge's wife] and the children, his desolation when two of his children and finally his wife die." But when he decides to be less friendly, the results are devastating. Discussing English journalism, he once spoke of its "tradition of organized rudeness," and just recently a review by him of Paul Theroux's book on Naipaul concludes with the following salute to the American writer: "Of all the lice on the locks of literature at present crawling, he is one of the lustiest."[4] The rudeness is usually witty: reviewing a dull biography of an interesting man, John Sparrow, the Warden of All Souls, Wilson produces a priceless exchange between Sparrow and the historian A.L. Rowse who used to complain that Sparrow hadn't read his (many)

[4] This rich phrase should be attributed to Tennyson, who told Edmund Gosse that John Churton Collins (who had savagely attacked Gosse in print) was a "Louse on the Locks of Literature."

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books. "Do you know my *Tudor Cornwall*, John?" "No," replied Sparrow and gestured to the figure on his right: "Do you know Stuart Hampshire?" Sparrow's biographer thinks such a riposte was quick-witted, but Wilson suggests that Sparrow must have taken Hampshire into dinner at All Souls many times before he could trap Rowse into saying the line about *Tudor Cornwall*.

Such English common room aggression might have merely turned into the sort of spiteful entertainment produced by an Auberon Waugh (who once, reviewing something I'd published, called it "this idiotic little book"). But Auberon could not have written *God's Funeral*, the essential richness of which lies not in any speculative insights it gives us about what happened to God over the past two hundred years, but in the individual "penfriends" brought to life in its pages. In the essay on Dean Inge, an address given to something Catholic-sounding called The Ambrose Society in 1985, Wilson speaks as a Christian; and his *How Can We Know?* of the same year has a preface declaring that his writing of the book made him discover "that in spite of everything, I did believe the Christian religion to be inescapably and irresistibly true." In the final paragraph of *How Can We Know?*, however, the word "but" appears four times. Six years later he contributed an essay to a pamphlet series "Against Religions" in which he declared organized religion to be "a form of moral blackmail." And in *The Faber Book of Church and Clergy*, which he selected and edited in 1992, he declared "I stand outside the church these days." It's not easy, perhaps not possible, to decide on the evidence of *God's Funeral* where Wilson "really stands" now with regard to Christianity, but he writes a concluding paragraph that asserts, *contra* Death-of-God talk—"One of the most extraordinary things about the twentieth century has been the palpable and visible strength of the Christian thing, the Christian idea." Certainly he sounds exhilarated rather than dismayed by that fact. But unceasingly "the Christian thing" has provided the energy fueling Wilson's writing, fictional and otherwise.

I see no overall "argument" to *God's Funeral*; its life instead is in its parts, its portraits that add up to what Wilson calls "a story of bereavement as much as of adventure." This story is borne out from the opening poem by Thomas Hardy ("God's Funeral") to concluding accounts of some embattled, "modernist" religious thinkers. Many of the judgments are expressed in the language of

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high admiration, guaranteed to give us pause. Is Swinburne "an unjustly neglected great poet"? (Perhaps so, but who can actually read the poems line by line?) Is Rossetti's painting, *Beata Beatrix*, "perhaps the greatest work of art of the 19th century?" (Well . . .) Can you guess what book Wilson would keep if all the others written in the reign of Victoria—like *David Copperfield, In Memoriam, The Origin of Species*—were destroyed? (Ruskin's *Fors Clavigera*, "Impossible to summarize either what the letters are like or what they are about." So there.) Sometimes the epithets make one just a shade nervous: Kant is "the dwarfish genius of Königsberg"; Benjamin Jowett is "the endearing if slightly absurd master of Balliol"; Mark Pattison is "the crabby old Rector of Lincoln." The ghost of Strachey lurks. And when Wilson takes arms against figures he dislikes (and whom I admire) like Arnold and Shaw, I bristled a bit. Shaw's crank beliefs, as in the virtues of the all-wool Jaeger suit, are held up for ridicule, but there's no indication that Wilson is at all moved, or even entertained by the plays. Perhaps he isn't, and he certainly is in no way responsive, except with contempt, to Arnold, "lofty Matt," who got all soft about "those delicate, beautiful Greeks." Arnold's poetry, or rather "Dover Beach," is dismissed by claiming that its sea of faith metaphor is confused. But Wilson is himself confused—to the extent that he misrepresents *Culture and Anarchy*—in identifying Arnold's Philistines as "the governing aristocratic class." Arnold called that class the Barbarians, a name Wilson gives instead to the rising middle-class Philistines. In telling us that Swinburne found Arnold's lectures on poetry "boring," Wilson adds, parenthetically, "which they are," as if we needed to be assured they really were. As for the "Wragg is in custody" passage in "The Function of Criticism," Wilson reduces it to effete snobbery. And although he admires George Eliot much more than he does Arnold, his comment on F.W.H. Myers' famous description of walking with her in the Fellows' Garden at Trinity College, Cambridge, is surely odd. Eliot told Myers on that occasion that of the three great words—God, Immortality, and Duty—the first and second were, respectively, inconceivable and unbelievable. But the third was peremptory and absolute. Myers writes, "I listened, and night fell; her grave, majestic countenance turned toward me like a sibyl's in the gloom; it was as though she withdrew from my grasp, one by one, the two scrolls of promise, and left me the third scroll only, awful

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with inevitable fates." Wilson quotes this as an example of how some of Eliot's contemporaries found her position on unbelief "somewhat arid." I should have called Myers' response anything but that.

But this is to niggle about a book full of fine things (like urging us to *read* Kant rather than swallow a summary of his "thought") and always instinct with Wilson's highly original, cultivatedly aggressive mind and style. Who else could write, by way of characterizing one's impatience with certain kinds of religious fundamentalists, "You just want to shout 'yah boo sucks.'" (This must be good English schoolboy lingo.) Like Ruskin, about whom he has some vivid pages, Wilson's "intemperate judgments," expressed in a twenty-three-year career's worth of books, "contribute to his charm." Surely he would not mind his assertion about Ruskin being applied to himself: "You never quite know which way he will jump."

A. N. Wilson (b. 1950)

The Sweets of Pimlico (1977)
Unguarded Hours (1978)
Kindly Light (1979)
The Healing Art (1980)
The Laird of Abbotsford (1980, biography)
Who Was Oswald Fish? (1981)
Wise Virgin (1982)
A Life of John Milton (1983, biography)
Hilaire Belloc (1984, biography)
Scandal (1984)
Gentlemen in England (1985)
How Can We Know? (1985, religious inquiry)
Love Unknown (1986)
Stray (1987, children's)
Tolstoy (1988, biography)
Penfriends from Porlock (1988, essays)
Tabitha (1989, children's)
Eminent Victorians (1989, biographical essays)

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C.S. Lewis: A Biography (1990)
The Lampitt Chronicles
Incline Our Hearts (1989)
A Bottle in the Smoke (1990)
Daughters of Albion (1992)
Hearing Voices (1995)
A Watch in the Night (1996)
Jesus (1992)
(ed.) *The Faber Book of Church and Clergy* (1992)
(ed.) *The Faber Book of London* (1993)
The Vicar of Sorrows (1993)
The Rise and Fall of the House of Windsor (1993)
Paul: The Mind of the Apostle (1997)
Dream Children (1998)
God's Funeral (1999, intellectual history)

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HENRY SHUKMAN

The Venice Faxes

The happy circumstance that "facsimile" transmission generates for both parties a full set of correspondence, both sent and received, has encouraged us to assemble between the covers of this little pamphlet an exchange with Sally Splinter, our late historian. It is now three months since we lost Sally. She had been travelling on assignment for our Jesus College "Venice in Peril" Committee, of which she was, as in all things, an enthusiastic member, when she met her tragic end. The following will shed no light on the unexpectedness of her demise but will reassure all that Sally's last hours were at least happy. For the sake of clarity we have included all relevant transmissions, even those in which some of us may not appear in the most flattering of lights. At first we hoped a suitably edited version might be produced, but after much discussion thought it best to let the letters stand as sent, as testimony to Sally's undauntable spirits and tribute to her undying love of the beautiful.

I have no doubt that we will all be inspired to make a reality of her dream of Saving Santa Monica. Don't miss the October Ball! (Contact Jesus College Porters Lodge for tickets @ £75 each.)

Dame Cynthia Templeton, Warden, August, 198-

FAO: Dame Cynthia Templeton. From: Sally Splinter, La Residenza. Monday 9 May, 2:30 P.M.

Dear Cynthia,

Receive this in the personal line, not the official. Don't think I've been neglecting my mission, however; report to follow.

I don't need to tell you how dreamy Venice is at the soberest of times. On this visit it has surpassed itself. I always forget, don't you? The first vaporetto trip and the magic reawakens as if it has been hidden inside one all along waiting for the first kiss of Venetian light . . .

To the point: I think I just may have found us a new project. I

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know I know, that's not what I'm supposed to be doing, but hear me out. I've been to the Scuola di San Rocco cellars already, I've done everything I should have done, don't think I'm being slack. But darling, I have found us a *gem*, an ecstasy of a church, a place you start loving before you even see it. You *feel* it from around the corner. Drifting my way back from the Scuola, I stopped in at a trattoria for *mezzogiorno* (the most wonderful prosecco—I'm a complete convert) and all through lunch I had this strange extra feeling. I got up from my table and just sort of glided round the corner, almost as if I knew what I was going to see, and came face to face with the most beautiful, and crumbling, façade. Not a big church, but perfection. Tail-end Romanesque, just the right time, with a heavenly weave of white and green marble and beautiful brickwork of that warm burgundy hue only the Venetians knew how to bake. It has its own little courtyard in front (flagstones) and sits on its own little canal in a quiet part of the city near the Ghetto.

Let me know ASAP if I may pursue. Holding breath, crossing fingers.

All love, Sally

To: Sally Splinter, c/o La Residenza. From: Cynthia Templeton, Senior Common Room, Jesus College, Cambridge. Monday 9th May, 5 P.M.

Yes, dear, very interesting, but what's it *called*? And what does "FAO" mean?

Best, Cynthia

FAO: Cynthia. From: Sally. Monday 9th May, 6 P.M.

Dear Cynthia:

Santa Monica Dell'Orto. Monica of the Orchard. What a name!

(FAO, FYI, means "for the attention of." Sometimes abbreviated to ATTN. Where have you been the last five years? Mouldering away in the same libraries as I, I expect.)

First things first. I shared a boat taxi from the airport with a German couple (frightfully trendy Berliners, all in black, black

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hair, black clothes, black bags) and saw something miraculous even then, long before we reached the city. There we are, racing across the muddy brown lagoon, a row of barber's poles guiding us, when all of a sudden a buoy bobs up from the waves ahead. It sinks and rises again, and just as we approach it, a human figure emerges from the waters, standing up right out there in the middle of the lagoon. The buoy is his head. And not only is he naked, but golden. Bright gold. Is it the mud? His wet tan? The Venetian light? I say "his" but I can't really see if it's man or woman, with the sunlight blazing on the water. Of course there must be a sandbank we can't see, but it's still too fantastic.

He sank back into the waves as we passed and when I looked back he was gone. What could be more Venetian? So almost-absurd, so dreamy. It makes one want to laugh, or cry.

No sooner have I dumped my bags at La Residenza (another story) than I trundle off to Signore Pranzo at the UNICEF office. And what an office. It made me wonder: am I the right person to be representing us? Why not Lady Oliver, for example, or you, Dame Cynthia? Why lowly me, crawling out of the History Department? The Venetians are terribly snobbish. They'd be thrilled to be dealing with the Duke of Somerset's relative, a dame to boot.

Up princely stairs (marble of course), down an immense corridor, into a vestibule the size of our chapel lined with silk from the Pucci mills—original eighteenth c., needless to say. A chandelier the size of a car, glass knives tinkling in the breeze. Creaky wooden floors, antique desks, lots of clutter, papers everywhere, and *huge*. Huge room, huge windows. You can make as much mess as you like in an office like that. The space eats it up for you.

Signore Pranzo wears slacks, loafers, a blue shirt open at collar, a real continental, casual and elegant at once (why *are* we so dowdy in England?). We went over everything we had already discussed in the letters, properly and bureaucratically (all of which will appear in report—to come), then he gave me, for interest's sake, a list of every building in Venice currently needing "*stabilizzazione*," as they euphemistically call it. What they all need, of course, is *restaurazione*.

Then, after lunch, strolling along the Canale di San Martino, aglow with prosecco and espresso, I began to feel something I

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have never felt before. Don't laugh or recommend my tenure be investigated. I'm a hundred percent compos. I've pinched and cold-watered myself a dozen times, and yes I'm here and I'm awake. But I believe I could have walked on water. I knew exactly where to go, and there she was.

No orchard now, of course. What a pitiful state. Half the marble fallen from the façade and lying on the paving in fragments. You can see the brown moisture halfway up the walls. Disastrous. And all crumbling and disastrous-looking inside too. But at once you know it's a dream of a church. Small and perfect. And when I drifted into the Lady Chapel at the back I realized I had arrived at the source of what had come over me.

Sitting in one corner is a great lump of marble, an unfinished statue of Santa Monica, the limbs and hands and face still in the act of being born. It was found in an orchard in 1370 and the Venetians decided it was miraculous and built the church for it. Who else on earth could care so much about an unfinished statue as to build a church for it? Wonderful people.

I'm skeptical as the next, but that block sat bathed in its own special light. It glowed, it shone, it hovered as if far away across a misty valley. Her face bends low over her legs. She's sort of hunched up, head tipped to one side. She has a beautiful face, even if it's only in rough, with a sort of smile, not exactly a smile. She looked at me. Stopped me in my tracks. A human face. A wonderful mother, something like that, the mother none of us ever had (except your boys); and when you see her, you feel you have known her quiet presence all through your life.

Basta. Enough incoherence. Tomorrow Signore Pranzo and I talk to the padre.

Sally

FAO: Sally Splinter. From: Cynthia Templeton, Jesus College. Tuesday 10 May, 8:30 A.M.

Darling,

You are our representative over there. You're supposed to be sending back reports. Letters are decidedly welcome of course, but I can't very well hand them through to the Committee. And Venice is full of heavenly churches in need of help. But still . . . it

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does sound exciting. We'll have some convincing to do, since we did already select, so "Fax" back AT ONCE with more.

Love, Cynthia

P.S. As for my going to Venice instead of you, and mentioning Jimmy—don't be absurd! You are *just* the person. By the way, I have given your fax number to your student Marion Gornick. She's in rather a state.

P.P.S. And what might "FYI" mean, Daughter of Tomorrow?

P.P.P.S. Aren't these machines fun? One feels terribly important.

FAO: Sally Splinter. From: Cynthia Templeton. S.C.R., Jesus College. Tuesday 10 May, 12 P.M.

Well? I've been waiting all morning . . .

FAO: Cynthia Templeton. From: Sally. Tuesday 10 May, 1:30 P.M.

Cynthia:

I always thought I was a morning person, but I have discovered I'm not, I'm a *lunch* person. Despite last night's Campari(s) I feel deliciously alert just now.

Sorry last was so long. This threatens to be as bad. Today has been quite a day so far.

I saw Pranzo at the UNICEF office first thing. There's a complication. Santa Monica isn't even on his list. He couldn't say why, she just slipped through. Some do. "Everything's ad hoc," he said. "Half our task is simply to address that." They're *in process*, he says (bureaucrats talk like psychologists these days—does everyone?). It's a miracle I found her.

Everyone is terribly understanding and terribly scientific. Everyone? There are three girls in the office, and Rufella di Giorgianni (grandest countess in Venice) and a Mr. John Padson from the E.C. and a Signore Fratelli from the Venice City Council who has to take every project to his Councillors. He doesn't think there's likely to be any objection to helping Santa Monica. Why would there be? He's going to come up with me to have a "look about."

(Just ordered *spag vongole alla griglia* and a glass of Trentino-

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Baggio. Mmm. Picasso, Peggy, Pound et al. used to eat here, so it says on the menu. Usually a bad sign, don't you think, a menu with a message, but in this case no. The Trentino just arrived—fab.)

Down to business. Fratelli of the City Council: roly-poly, frightfully Italian. Wears a vest under his shirt. One of those mown and trimmed beards, a sort of strap around the jaw-line. Probably what's left of his jaw is all swallowed up in a residue of pasta. The dear has been invaluable. He got the plans for the church from the Officina delle Labori della Citta—the O.L.C., don't forget that, they're important. Apparently the church is sinking. Of course, what's new? But it's not only sinking, the water is also rising up the stonework. Capillary action, I think (vague memory from O-level Chemistry). But *if* they slice through the masonry and insert a copper sheet, and *if* all the masonry above is soaked in acid, then . . . maybe. And there's a Bellini. A raggedy *Pietà*, but a Bellini none the less. It'll need to be taken to the Ospedale di Santa Croce, a sort of hospital for pictures to which Fratelli promises to take me, says it's something to see.

Aha. My *vongole* have arrived. Till later, S.

Almost forgot: **F**or **Y**our **I**nformation.

After due consultation it was decided to include the correspondence with Ms. Gornick. The reader will note that we opted to arrange this portion—as with the rest—in strict chronology.

FAO: Marion Gornick. From: Sally Splinter. 10 May, 4:15 P.M.

Sweetheart, Marion,

If-oh-oh-only you were here . . . You would feel so much better, you would *understand* why this life is for you (though I appreciate your worries). Venice is the godmother of us downhill tweedies—I don't mean you, of course. It was always a city for visitors with souls unencumbered by the day-to-day of procreation—Venice's Vestals, the ones with space in our hearts, our ears not drowned by infants' cries.

Laying it on a bit thick? To the point: how *are* you? Are things any clearer? I hated to leave you in such a state, with so much

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happening all at once and so much to decide. For what it's worth, I'm more convinced than ever of what I have said all along. Not only are you far too good to hide away in a bungalow on the fringes of Cleveland, wherever that is, but this is the life for you. You are made for it as no one I've known before. You can't imagine the riches awaiting you.

Fax me here. Aren't these instant letters fun? Miss you miss you,
Sally

FAO: Sally Splinter. From: Dame Templeton, Jesus College. 10 May, 6 P.M.

Sally? Well? Are you there? It's Tuesday night and I'm sitting here next to this contraption waiting for it to warble and chatter and generally disturb the peace, and give me news of my Sally and my Monica.

I have news for you, actually. Your student Marion came to see me again. She's terribly nice, terribly unhappy. I think you should talk to her asap. She was in an almighty panic about her thesis binding or some such. You can "fax" her here and I won't read. Promise. Scout's.

Love, Cynthia

Attn: Sally Splinter. From: Marion Gornick, Jesus College Library. 10 May, 6:15 P.M.

Dearest Sally,

I'm so sorry to bother you when you have so much on your plate and the last thing you want to think about is little old me stuck in the rain (constant since you left), but I'm just so churned up at the moment, I don't know what to do. Tom has been calling all the time. He says the prospect of leaving has made him realize that he can't go without me etc. etc. What do I do? Do I want to become little wifey in Ohio?

I feel awful talking about all this when you're busy doing Important Things. I got your fax number from Dame Templeton. I hope you don't mind. (I told her it was about my thesis.)

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And actually I am worried about that too, needless to say. The binder needs to know what binding I want. How should I know? There's about sixty different kinds and he's being so nasty and sort of: well what can I do about it ma'am? I wish he wouldn't call me ma'am.

Help. All love, Marion

P.S. Just got *your* message. Heaven. I can't tell you how much better I felt the instant I walked into the Lodge and saw the fax scroll filling up my pigeonhole. Such a strange time, all these opportunities all at once. Tom and I had lunch today and of course it was nice, not having seen each other in a while. And no I didn't, in case you're wondering. We had a drink in the Granta (I ordered Campari, just for you), then I said goodbye and that I would continue to think. Very firm and simple. Shaking inside, of course. Are you sure no one can read this? I'm terrified the machine has a memory like a computer and will spew it all out. M.

FAO: Dame Templeton. From: Sally. Tuesday May 10th, 7 P.M.

Dear Cynthia, Didn't you get my message of earlier? Sending again. And thanks re. Marion. Just heard from her. S.

FAO: Sally. From: Cynthia. Wednesday 11 May, 1 P.M.

Darling,

Found *both* copies of your last—ta. I've had a word with a couple of the Committee members who reminded me that the point of the San Rocco cellars is that we know precisely what is involved, what it will cost and what our "input" will achieve. Do you really think you can pull off something new in so little time? You haven't given us much to go on. Yes it's pretty, yes it needs work, but . . .

More, please, more.

Cynthia

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FAO: Marion Gornick. From: Sally. May 11, 6:45 P.M.

Dearest Marion,

You know more about these new-fangled machines than I do but I can't imagine they would waste their time regurgitating our verbiage. Apparently our messages crossed.

Re. Campari: I'm having one now just for you, sitting on my balcony overlooking an adorable piazza. Boys bouncing a football around, a lovely plain church, a couple of almond trees, sun setting, pen in hand.

I've found us the most wonderful church. You must come and see it. Somebody said that a city comes alive when you love someone in it, and they were right. I can't tell you how I feel, knowing Santa Monica is just there, a mile or two away over the rooftops. The only thing missing is you.

Now listen, dear. Don't do anything. Just let it all drop for a day or two. You have nothing at all to worry about, although it doesn't look that way to you. You're a brilliant woman with a wonderful career ahead of her. If you throw it away in order to play wife on some ghastly Midwestern campus you'll never forgive yourself. I've seen it time and again, there's nothing worse than the life of a campus wife. It's like being an army wife only—only worse. Hold your ground. And re. your thesis: go to that man in Botolph Lane, he's terribly nice, he's done a million theses, and tell him I personally gave strict instructions that he is to do the *usual.* He'll know what I mean.

Of course Tom would be calling just when he's about to leave. He's terrified. But what didn't work once won't work again. Don't *worry*, that's the main thing. If you don't worry you can see the wood for the trees. And your Fellowship is a foregone thing, as you ought to know. It's just a matter of paperwork.

Remember you're my little star. No setting just yet.

No one here speaks a word of English. You can write what you like. Just trust and have faith. You're the best. Here's looking at you, kid (Campari-clink).

FAO: Cynthia. From: Sally. 11 May, 7 P.M.

Cynthia:

Right. Down to business. Fratelli took me back up to the

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church. He knew the padre, who lives in an extraordinary apartment block a few steps away, the nearest thing to a high-rise Venice has. All of five stories, rather municipal and grisly, except for vines growing up the walls.

The padre was sunk deep in an armchair from which he entertained us with something called *porto bianco*—never heard of it; a bit rich for ten in the morning. Of course he knew nothing about the specifics of the church, but kept repeating, "*E grande cosa, e grande cosa.*" He still conducts services among the rubble. I liked him. Flabby cheeks, flabby throat spilling over his collar, and all trembly with drink, but sort of soft and reassuring. One would feel safe going to confession with him. He was a ruin like his church.

Fratelli was jovial and boisterous and deferential, and somewhere in the course of their conversation, which I only half managed to follow because the priest had a terrible habit of mumbling into his chest, Fratelli apparently succeeded in gaining the man's approval for restoration work. So he said, anyway, once we were outside. So it looks like it's a "go."

Keep you posted, S.

To: Sally. From: Marion. May 12th. 8:30 A.M.

Dearest Sally,

What's the use of trusting and having faith if you don't *do* something? Staying here when I could go there, etc., etc.—it feels like turning my back on life.

Awake *all* last night. If only you were here.

Marion

FAO: Sally. From: Cynthia. Thursday May 12th, 5 P.M.

Sally,

You've got me on tenterhooks. Are we going to have to throw another ball? Another dinner? *How much*? Have we got enough? What's the "bottom line"? C.

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To: Marion. From: Sally. 12 May, 5:45 P.M.

Darling Marion,

Just got back. Sorry to keep you waiting all day. How can embracing your talents and putting them to their best use be to turn your back on life? Relax. Wait. At least until I get back.

Kisses, Sally

FAO: Cynthia. From: Sally. May 12th, 5:50 P.M.

Cynthia,

How much? I don't know yet. Fratelli is working night and day to sort things out. Santa Monica will need the same water tanks for the *acque alte* as San Rocco. *Can* we do another fundraiser? *Would* it be too awful to change projects? So many people are pouring money into San Rocco as it is, and if we're really honest, were we ever terribly excited about saving some dreary cellars and a humdrum crucifixion cycle by unknown assistants? Wouldn't it be divine to have our *own* project, rather than just taking up the slack in some Minnesota chapter's? The Jesus Venice Project—Saving Santa Monica!

You should see the signore here in the hotel. He emerges from behind his enormous cluttered desk frowning, conjuring endless scrolls of thin, shiny paper—your faxes. Victorian circus man's sideburns, giant whiskers, the ubiquitous pasta belly. Pasta bellies are much more attractive than beer bellies. Maybe I'll move here and grow one, I'm due a year's sabbatical.

Marion's fragile. Look after her. At least—not too well, you understand. She's fiercely bright, and really there's nothing else she could happily do than be a don, but she's going through that "Is this the life I want?" phase, "All the other things I could do" and "Who am I anyway?" I told her last week we'd have her, junior fellow and so on. Be nice.

Hugs, Sally

ATTN: SALLY SPLINTER, D.PHIL., C/O LA RESIDENZA. Friday 13th May, 9:30 A.M.

Dear Miss Splinter,

Lady Templeton has kindly brought me up to date as regards your progress in Venice.

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I feel I should remind you that at the Governing Body Meeting of April 11th, the Senior Fellows did agree to allocate a part of this year's Budget Surplus Funds towards a Charitable Project. As I believe you are aware, these funds amount to a little over £94,000, and I understand that a suitable project has already been earmarked for them. I must stress that I see no likelihood of further funds becoming available this fiscal year.

If in fact it turns out there are other projects the College's "Venice in Peril" Committee might like to help sponsor, there may be further opportunities in future fiscal years.

The Bursar, Jesus College, Cambridge

FAO: Cynthia Templeton. From Sally. Friday 13th May, 10:15 A.M.

Cynthia,

The beastly bursar has sent me a letter. Blah blah blah. He called you "Lady."

Fratelli and the O.L.C. are working on a "Plan of Priorities." The Bellini, for example, isn't urgent. Most urgent are floor and walls. *Then* roof, apparently. Here the greatest dangers are from below. Fratelli says a conservative estimate of the initial costs for "stabilizing" her might be around £250,000. I know it's a lot but we can do it bit by bit. He says he can break it down for me and I'll affix his report to mine, of course, and show how the thing would be done in stages. We could gradually raise the funds, ball by ball, raffle by raffle.

Report should be ready soon.

Love, S.

FAO: Sally. From: Cynthia. Friday 13th May, 10:30 A.M.

Darling,

Yes, I'm sure it's a beautiful church but get a grip. Of course we can't ask the governing body to stretch to 250,000. Don't be absurd. And you can't raise a quarter of a million with raffles. Go to Harry's Bar, have a Bellini or three, relax.

Cynthia

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FAO: Cynthia. From: Sally. Friday night.

Darling Cynthia,

Something wonderful has happened. You're going to think I'm mad. *I* think I'm mad, except if I am I want to be.

She *moved*. She lifted her head and smiled at me. I have never seen such a smile.

Do you remember Bill/Bertha who spent a term at the college back in the days *she* was *he*? He once told me a story about swimming with whales off Patagonia. The moment he slipped into the water he felt an all-pervasive love envelope him. He was aware of a presence passing beneath him like a bus, and a moment later the giant surfaced and a gentle eye looked at him. He had never felt so much love as in that gaze.

I have felt the same thing. I was sitting all alone in the Lady Chapel. Occasionally there's a dear old man who carries a broom around the church never quite bringing himself actually to make contact with the floor, but he was nowhere to be seen. It's mid morning, very quiet. The whispered scuffle of a pigeon alighting outside. The blurry shadow of a tree brushing back and forth across a dusty window. We're sitting there, just the two of us, just me and Santa Monica in stone, and I'm experiencing a curious peace, almost like a *déjà vu* only better, when gently it dawns on me that she is looking at me.

I don't know how to explain. I keep trying phrases and none fits. First of all, the stone is a lovely pale marble. Second, there's something mystifying about those half-carved features. Third, the stone seems to attract light. The rest of the room could be in gloom but the statue would still be bathed in a dreamy desert light. As I looked up she raised her head—just a little, but unmistakably—and smiled at me. A smile that didn't so much register in my eyes as my breast. As if all that light around her shone within me. I blinked and coughed and it made no difference, she was still smiling at me.

I never felt anything like this before. A fullness in my heart as if a flame has been lit. What is the flame? What is its fuel? Love and love. Love for what? Love for nothing, for everything. Now, hours later, she still comes with me everywhere. Who is she? Whoever she is, I am hers, always have been and always will be. Everything but everything makes sense. I know now that our work,

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I mean our academic work, is valuable, and I also know it isn't at all valuable. But it has a place, it belongs in a scheme. Isn't that wonderful? S.

FAO: Sally. From: Cynthia. Friday 13th, 8:20 P.M.

Stendhal Syndrome. Obviously. Oh lucky lucky you. I'm *devilishly* jealous—*always* wanted it.

This is all marvellous, darling, but where is our report!!?? The bursar is getting uneasy. You've been there five days, all these faxes coming in, and no report on his desk. Where is it? You must sit down and write to him, to us. You are our deputy.

Are you sure you're quite well? Ought you to look in on the hotel doctor?

Ciao, Cynthia

To: Sally Splinter. From: Marion Gornick. May 13th. 4:15 P.M.

Dearest Sally,

Just had dinner with Tom. He keeps telling me America is the place to be, I'll get a job over there, it's the future of civilization, a new life waiting for us. I listen to him and see his hopefulness and such a promising look in his eyes and I think he's right, why turn my back on the future? How can I possibly disappoint this man? But then I come home and before I even open the door I realize I'm terrified of going to America, and that the prospect of staying here with such a good job (you're so kind to have set it up) is something I couldn't contemplate rejecting. What shall I *do*?

Love, Marion

FAO: Cynthia. 14th May 9-ish

C: I went to see the priest again. I rapped on his door and waited five minutes then it opened a crack and he looked me up and down, just like in the movies. We sat in silence, both of us deeply comfortable. I felt so at home. Then I told him, I just came

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right out with it: she smiled at me, I said. He nodded and smiled too, and I knew exactly that he understood. She is divine. Whatever you want to call it, it's for real. There *are* more things. . . . Time we adjusted our philosophies, Dame Philosopher.

The padre says every day he expects to find that the statue has dropped clean through the paving and sunk without trace in the marshes beneath the city.

About the bursar. At first I thought: Can you believe the man is so pig-witted, so unimaginative and dull? Fly him out here! Let him come and see for himself. If we are going to have a Jesus Venice Project then why do it by halves? But then I thought of Monica and realized even the bursar is to be understood. She makes one forgive everyone. Beauty such as hers needs no vessel. Churches and cities may crumble to the sea but she will live on. She is not of stone, though she may occupy it for now.

Loving wishes, S.

P.S. Actually I did go to the doctor after having two dizzy spells yesterday. He's given me the all-clear. Says I should rest. *Venice make peoples sick because they walk and walk breathing the bad airs and won't take the boat.*

FAO: Marion. From: Sally. Saturday morning, first day of life.

Dearest Marion,

You *can't* turn your back on the future, my sweet. It's simply impossible. It doesn't matter where you go or what you do, it doesn't even matter if you are dead or alive, you can't escape the divine scheme which holds us all in its love. Forgive the vatism but it's true. You have to find whatever will bring you to that love in yourself.

I've never told you this but Venice is a special place for me for a reason above and beyond the usual. The first time I came here I thought I was going to marry. I came with him, George. We had recently decided. I had done a year of my Ph.D., he was working outside Ely (there used to be an electronics plant there, part of Marconi), and they were going to send him to Wales as manager

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of a new plant. Of course I was planning to go with him. That was 1956. We came to Venice for a weekend, an extravagance the like of which we'd never approached before, a celebration of his job offer. My career, my plans, *my* future just weren't in the picture, really, his picture or mine even. What was a Ph.D.? Paper, nothing.

I had read all the usual—Ruskin, Byron, James, Mann—but none of it had prepared me for Venice. Nothing can. If you can bring your life to Venice and it survives, then it's probably sound. My plans, our plans, *his* plans crumbled in the air here. And I had thought they were built of stone.

We were flying BOAC with a touch-down in Paris on the way back. We had a drink in the airport at Orly. I had been morose for a day and a half, practically all of our wonderful weekend. Finally he asked if anything was wrong.

I said all kinds of things I didn't even know I thought. I had to be honest. I had to match up to Venice. He went to Wales and married a nice girl (they always do) and that was that.

At the time I thought I was being brave; in fact I was just doing what I had no choice but to do. Regrets? No. Not even over unfulfilled motherhood? It finds other ways of fulfilling itself. No life is easy. You have to find the one for you. You try and you might be wrong, but at least you honor your gifts. That may be life's only injunction.

The most extraordinary thing happened in the church. The statue—did I already tell you?—smiled at me. I thought I was going mad, but it is a miraculous statue and the priest wasn't a bit surprised when I told him. Am I going soft in my old age? A palpitation, the head swims, the eyes mist over—that sort of thing? And the feeling is just a flush of well-being as good health, proper functioning, returns? But my heart is fine. The doctor said so. I wish you could feel the love of Santa Monica at work as I do. You are loved. Loved, loved, loved,

Sally

This was the last communication received from Sally Splinter. On the afternoon of Sunday, May 15th she was discovered supine in the Lady

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Chapel of Santa Monica dell'Orto with a smile on her face, deceased of unknown causes.

Now that Jesus College has decided to take on Santa Monica for its "Venice in Peril" Campaign, it is strongly hoped that our donors will give generously in order to realize Sally's dream of Saving Santa Monica. The campaign gratefully acknowledges the splendid contributions generated by Ms. Gornick, now Mrs. Owen, through her vigorous fundraising in Ohio. Don't forget the Ball!

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DAVID R. SLAVITT

Shine in the Dreadfull Dark: The Sidnean Psalms

As a Mithridate to the frenzies of speculative day trading in the literary marketplace, it is perhaps helpful to consider how leisurely the process can be by which a poet's reputation finds its proper—or at least temporarily settled—level. In the publication last year of *The Collected Works of Mary Sidney Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke,*[1] there is encouragement for those of us who may have been discouraged, depressed, or even at the point of giving up hope altogether. These moving, accomplished, and immediately engaging poems have been waiting since 1621 for this belated and still slightly beclouded admission into the canon.

The delay is, in part, the Countess's own fault. While she was assiduous in getting the work of her brother, Sir Philip Sidney, into print—an undertaking which reduced the stigma of publication for other writers—she was less forward about her own work. The translation of the Psalms that he had commenced, she edited and completed: he did the first through the 43rd, and hers are 44 to 150. But she was content to have these circulate in manuscript, and they did, indeed, circulate to the right people—not only to her immediate circle at Wilton House in Wiltshire (which included Spenser, Fulke Greville, and Samuel Daniel), but to Queen Elizabeth, who was sent a copy with an elegant dedicatory poem by the Countess. John Donne has a poem, 56 lines long, "Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir Philip and the Countess of Pembroke his sister," which praises their work with unalloyed enthusiasm:

> The songs are these, which heavens high holy Muse
> Whisper'd to *David, David* to the Jewes:
> And *Davids* Successors, in holy zeale,

[1] THE COLLECTED WORKS OF MARY SIDNEY HERBERT, ed. by *Margaret P. Hannay, Noel J. Kinnamon,* and *Michael G. Brennan.* Oxford University Press. Vol. 1, $98.00; Vol. 2, $135.00.

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In formes of joy and art to re-reveale
To us so sweetly and sincerely too,
That I must not rejoyce as I would doe
When I behold that these Psalmes are become
So well attyr'd abroad, so ill at home,
So well in Chambers, in thy Church so ill,
As I can scarce call that reform'd untill
This be reformed; Would a whole State present
A lesser gift than some one man hath sent?
And shall our Church unto our Spouse and King
More hoarse, more harsh than any other, sing?
For *that* we pray, we praise thy name for *this*,
Which, by this *Moses* and this *Miriam*, is
Already done; and as those Psalmes we call
(Though some have other Authors) *Davids* all:
So though some have, some may some Psalmes translate,
We thy Sydnean Psalmes shall celebrate,
And, till we come th'Extemporall song to sing,
(Learn'd the first hower, that we see the King,
Who hath translated those translators) may
These their sweet learned labors, all the way
Be as our tuning, that, when hence we part
We may fall in with them, and sing our part.

I must have been a sophomore when I first read that poem, but I cannot possibly have understood except in the vaguest way what Donne was very clearly talking about—the truly terrible translations of the Psalms that had been published in 1562 and were in use in congregational worship in cathedrals and parish churches throughout the country and that had gone through 150 editions by 1621, the year of the Countess's death.

In the introduction to *The Psalms of Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke* edited by J. C. A. Rathmell and published in 1963 there is a sample of the kind of thing Donne was talking about, a version published in the Anglo-Genevan Psalter of 1556 by John Hopkins of Psalm 55:

But God shall cast them deep in pit,
That thirst for blood always:
He will no guileful man permit

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To live out half his days.
Though such be quite destroid and gone,
In thee O Lord I trust:
I shall depend thy grace upon
With all my heart and lust.

Not surprisingly, Donne found this unexciting, both as a poet and a clergyman. He was, we may remember, Dean of St. Paul's and would very probably, except for his failing health, been made a bishop. The Countess's version would have appealed to him as literature and also as an occasion for spiritual exploration and cultivation:

but lord, how long shall these men tarry heere
fling them in pitt of death where never shin'd
the light of life and while I make my stay
on thee, let who their thirst with bloud allay
have their life-holding threed so weakly twin'd
that it half spunne, death may in sunder sheare.

George Herbert, another great poet cleric of the seventeenth century and a kinsman of the Countess, would also almost certainly have known the Sidnean Psalms. Indeed, it has been suggested, by Louis Martz among others, that their psalmody was one of the most important influences on his development as a religious poet.

Such overwhelming authority ought to have been enough to establish the Countess, but her work remained inaccessible for centuries, largely because of her own lack of enthusiasm about appearing in print. After her death, of smallpox in 1621, at the age of fifty-nine, her wishes were respected with a bizarre scrupulousness. It wasn't until 1823 that the Chiswick Press brought out a smallish edition. And in 1963, as a part of the Doubleday Anchor Seventeenth-Century Series, *The Psalms of Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke* appeared, edited by J. C. A. Rathmell. (It was reissued by New York University Press and is now out of print, but there is a selection of fifty of the Countess's psalms and a dozen of Sir Philip's, chosen, and with the spelling modernized by R. E. Pritchard, published in 1992 by Carcanet and available in

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the United States.[2] The forty-four psalms of Sir Philip, then, are available only in Rathmell or in the Ringler edition of Sidney's poems[3] which is out of print but available from used book dealers for anywhere between $24 and $81.)

Rathmell's 1963 publication ought to have changed the landscape of English studies, but the Countess's preferences—or prayers?—were still somehow being heeded. The sixties were not the best decade for such poetry. For one thing, seventeenth-century studies had peaked. Those exegetes and textual analysts who were the scholarly division of new criticism had gone over that ground impressively well, and smart young academics looking to make their own reputations and careers were foraging elsewhere. (Harold Bloom, leading the way, was working on Blake in the early sixties; then, in a demonstration of unrivaled quirky power, he moved on to offer a course bluntly but accurately entitled "Bloom on Bloom.")

The campus disturbances of the sixties were not helpful either. To read the Countess's Psalms aright, one needs a degree of poise and playfulness. Of civility, one might say. And the students then—the graduate students, especially—were too earnest and fervent and dull to qualify as her appropriate audience. The fact that she was female ought to have helped, but feminism, which was just getting underway, had (and still has) its own peculiar agenda. For a writer simply to be a woman was not enough; what they were looking for were women who were outcasts, whose work, however unpolished and naive, could be a vehicle for the scholars' sense of moral outrage and a way to exact payment for all kinds of wrongs the feminists believed their gender had suffered. (The ideal Women's Lit. subject is perhaps Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose angry but not very impressive short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," is the basis of an entire academic industry.) Often, the Women's Studies people are, like many ecologists, Marxists without Marx, and because they could not condescend to the Countess of Pembroke, who was singularly un-needy, they simply ignored her. Finally, in this Age of Aquarius, the Biblical source of the poetry weighed considerably against

[2] *The Psalms of Sir Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke*, ed. by R. E. Pritchard (Manchester, 1992).

[3] *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford, 1962).

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her. In public schools, these days, the Bible is the new forbidden book.

There was some notice, of course. In his introduction to *The Psalms in English*,[4] the late Donald Davie wrote:

> When in 1981 I edited *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, I tried to stem the tide of oblivion by printing five of the Countess of Pembroke's psalm-versions, proposing for good measure that on the evidence of these compositions the Countess was "the first woman-poet of genius in the history of English poetry." This was designedly a gift to feminist literary criticism. But the gift was spurned . . .

It was, indeed, and, peculiarly enough, the Countess's aristocratic preferences seem still to have retained much of their force. Oxford's recent publication of her collected work, a full-dress two-volume undertaking with complete scholarly apparatus, is so outrageously expensive as to discourage casual adventuring by any mere amateurs. At best, its appearance may spark some interest in the Pritchard selection of the Sidnean Psalms, but that volume is not altogether satisfactory, being only a sampling, and isn't easy to find. And the intellectual weather remains inhospitable. The latest fad of academic know-nothings involves a bias on the left against translation as a kind of intellectual imperialism, which dovetails nicely with a similar bias on the right, the belief that translation is inevitably a betrayal of the nuanced authenticity of the text in the source language.

The fact remains, however, that the Countess was one of the greatest poets of what remains the greatest age of English letters. That she is clearly more accomplished than her more famous brother has probably worked to her disadvantage. Seventeenth-century scholars are like any scholars in that they know what they know and aren't eager for revaluations. They don't read the literature anymore, but the literature on the literature. Sir Philip is graceful and elegant, if a little mannered. Here is his version of the Twenty-third Psalm:

> The Lord, the Lord my shepheard is,
> And so can never I

[4] *The Psalms in English*, ed. by Donald Davie (London, 1996).

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Tast misery,
He rests me in greene pasture his:
By waters still, and sweete
He guides my feete.

He me revives: leades me the way,
Which righteousness doth take,
For his names sake.
Yea though I should through valleys stray,
Of deathes dark shade, I will
Noe whitt feare ill.

For thou, deere Lord, thou me besett'st:
Thy rodd, and thy staff be
To comfort me;
Before me thou a table sett'st,
Even when foes envious ey
Doth it espy.

Thou oilst my head, thou fillst my cupp;
Nay more thou endless good,
Shalt give me food.
To thee, I say, ascended up,
Where though, the Lord of all,
Dost hold thy hall.

He has a sprightliness and the right pastoral feeling, but his sister's work is even more impressive. Her authority is immediate and incontrovertible. The splendid psalm of praise, the 150th, she renders as:

O laud the Lord, the God of hoasts commend,
exault his pow'r, advaunce his holynesse:
with all your might lift his almightinesse:
your greatest praise upon his greatness spend.

Make Trumpetts noise in shrillest notes ascend:
make Lute and Lyre his loved fame expresse:
him lett the pipe, hym lett the tabrett blesse,
him Organs breath, that windes or waters lend.

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Lett ringing Timbrells soe his honor sound,
lett sounding Cymballs so his glory ring,
that in their tunes such mellody be found,

As fitts the pompe of most triumphant king.
conclud: by all that aire, or life enfold,
lett high Jehova highly be extold.

It is a dance of language, with syntactical setups and payoffs, inversions and postponed verbs that syncopate and snap ("him lett the pipe, hym lett the tabrett blesse") and a playfulness that finds a plausible English equivalent to the sprightliness of the Hebrew.

The dreariness of the prayer book renditions about which Donne complained arises in part from the different intention of those translators, who are very regular and intend their transcriptions for use as hymns. But without the music, the bareness of Charles Wesley's 150th is painful:

Praise the Lord who reigns above
And keeps his court below;
Praise the holy God of love,
And all his greatness show;
Praise him for his noble deeds,
Praise him for his matchless pow'r
Him from whom all good proceeds
Let earth and heav'n adore.

Celebrate th'eternal God
With harp and psaltery,
Timbrels soft and cymbals loud
in his high praise agree.
Praise him ev'ry tuneful string;
All the reach of heav'nly art,
All the pow'rs of music bring,
The music of the heart.

Him, in whom they move and live,
Let ev'ry creature sing,

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Glory to their Maker give,
And homage to their King.
Hallowed be his name beneath,
As in heav'n on earth adored;
Praise the Lord in ev'ry breath,
Let all things praise the Lord.

It is, to be kind, heavy footed. That pow'r/adore rhyme in the first stanza is regrettable, and for the contemporary reader, "The music of the heart" of the second bears the Hallmark hallmark. The timbre of the poem is clearly one that demands a musicality in the prosody, which the Countess takes as her warrant for baroque embellishment that she announces in the first nervy flourish, "O laud the Lord." It is the last psalm, and, therefore, her valedictory piece, and it is no accident that the form she uses in this virtuoso performance is the Petrarchan sonnet, which her brother had made his own in *Astrophel and Stella.*

Having tried my own hand at some of these poems,[5] I have some sense of the risks of the undertaking. I was somewhat less brash, I'm afraid:

Hallelujah! Praise God, you
in his earthly temple. Angels, too,
in their heavenly congregation, praise
His might and the justice of His ways.
Praise Him for what he does and is.
Praise with the trumpets' fanfares His
magnificence. With harp and lyre
praise! In your song and dance, admire
and praise! With cymbal, snare, and drum,
with every twangle, flourish and thrum,
praise Him. And let each living thing
praise Him with every breath and sing:
Hallelujah!

I was well pleased, I must confess, with the effect of that enjambment at the end of the sixth line and the way it throws weight on "magnificence," but it can't begin to compare with the

[5] *Sixty-One Psalms of David,* trans. by David R. Slavitt (New York, 1996).

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impact of the deferred verb in the Countess's fourth line, where "spend" explodes and, in its extraordinary force, reminds us even of its sexual aspect. It is a syntactical equivalent of Bernini's statue of St. Theresa in her ecstasy.

A good number of the Psalms are acrostic, with the Hebrew running down the right-hand margin (Hebrew is read from right to left). This is, at the least, a distraction, which is a legitimate poetic strategy, a way of occupying the left lobe of the reader's brain so that the critical faculties are lulled and the logic of the argument can sneak in and take possession of the spirit. There is also a mystical element at work, the notion that the words are sacred vessels carrying their meanings in ways too complicated and subtle for most of us even to be able to imagine. This acrostic exercise occurs elsewhere in the Bible—the Book of Lamentations has several elaborate performances in poetry that is not at all playful but, on the contrary, full of the deepest grief in literature. Most translators ignore these tropes as an irrelevance or even an embarrassment. The Countess, not so easily flustered, recognized that there can be, in a *jeu d'esprit*, real spirit. Her Psalm 117 is praise of the Lord that announces that down the left hand majuscules:

P raise him that ay
R emains the same:
A ll tongues display
I ehovas fame.
S ing all that share
T his earthly ball:
H is mercies are
E xpos'd to all.
L ike as the word
O nce he doth give,
R old in record,
D oth time outlyve.

This kind of playfulness might seem to have little to do with spirituality, but, here Davie is quite correct in his insistence that

> What looks like vaunting is really apprehensive humility. The poems that she makes out of the psalms are gifts that she lays on the altar;

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> and she is at pains to show that her gifts are as "costly" as those that the Magi brought to the Christ-child in Bethlehem. Their brilliance, their variety, their dexterity are pressed on our attention to persuade us that anything less would fail to meet the awe-inducing occasion. To say it again, the entire enterprise is a work of devotion; it glorifies God by heaping up before Him all the glories it can muster. The versifier has one gift, that of versifying: and that gift, the only one he or she has, is laid before the Throne. This is a motive that, one may suppose and hope, impels certain poets in this as in previous centuries.

The imputation of motive is risky, always. There can be no question that, in large measure, piety and her love for her brother were what moved Mary Herbert to undertake the work, but along with such high-mindedness there were such basic satisfactions as that of doing a difficult thing well. Pritchard seems quite persuasive when he suggests that she

> might have felt uneasy about seeking to "match the matchless unicorn," her celebrated brother, but there would have been some inhibition about the very act of writing, as a woman. At that time women were strongly discouraged from any public self-assertion or literary activity. Her parade of poetic skill might be partly an indication of female capability, partly also an expression—particularly through any forced phrasing—of the tension produced by this act of presumption. In Petrarch's *Rime* or Philip's *Astrophel and Stella,* the protagonist adopts a variety of roles: so too does the speaker of the psalms (Philip remarked on David's "often and free changing of persons"), speaking variously as prophet, king, or anguished private individual. If the Countess, as Elizabethan lady, could not easily speak out publicly, she could at least, as a mouthpiece of the Psalmist's (male) voices, and like Shakespeare's heroines, speak most for herself when speaking as another.

Or, to put it a slightly different way, there are some constraints that are enabling and empowering. Privileged though she may have been, she was mortal, afflicted, and by no means immune from grief. In 1586, both her parents died, and then her brother Philip, wounded in the Low Countries at Zutphen, developed gangrene and died, too. The translation of the Psalms allowed her a way to give expression to the emotion she must have felt. This is her version of the agonized Psalm 88:

> My god, my lord, my help, my health;
> to thee my cry

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doth restles fly,
both when of sunn the day
the treasures doth display,
and night locks up his golden wealth.

Admitt to presence what I crave:
ô bow thine eare
my cry to heare,
whose soule with ills and woes
soe flowes, soe overflowes,
that now my life drawes nigh the grave.

With them that fall into the pitt
I stand esteem'd:
quite forcelesse deem'd,
as one who free from strife,
and sturr of mortall life,
among the dead at rest doth sitt.

Right like unto the murdred sort,
who in the grave
their biding have;
whom now thou dost no more
remember as before,
quite, quite cut off from thy support.

Throwne downe into the grave of graves
in darknes deepe
thou do'st me keepe:
where lightning of thy wrath
upon me lighted hath,
all overwhelm'd with all thy waves.

Who did know me, whom I did know,
remov'd by thee
are gone from me;
are gone? that is the best:
they all me so detest,
that now abrode I blush to goe.

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My wasted ey doth melt away
fleeting amaine,
in streames of paine
while I my praiers send,
while I my hands extend,
to thee, my god, and faile noe day.

Alas, my lord, will then be tyme,
when men are dead,
thy truth to spread?
shall they, whome death hath slaine,
to praise thee live againe,
and from their lowly lodgings clime?

Shall buried mouthes thy mercies tell?
dust and decay
thy truth display?
and shall they workes of mark
shine in the dreadfull dark?
thy Justice where oblivions dwell?

Good reason then I cry to thee,
and ere the light
salute thy sight,
my plaint to thee direct.
lord, why dost thou reject
my soule, and hide thy face from me?

Ay me, alas, I faint, I dy,
so still, so still
thou dost me fill,
and hast from yongest yeares,
with terrifying feares,
that I, in traunce, amaz'd doe ly.

All over me thy furies past:
thy feares my mind
doe fretting bind
flowing about mee soe,

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as flocking waters flow:
no day can overrun their haste.

Who erst to me were neare and deare
far now, ô farr
disjoyned ar:
and when I would them see,
who my acquaintance be,
as darknesse they to me appeare.

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ANDREW FRISARDI

The Anomaly of Edwin Muir

> Muir [was] concerned with imagination not only in order that there may be good poetry, but in order that man himself may survive.
>
> —Thomas Merton

Octavio Paz has pointed out that the evolution of art is not as linear as modern art history makes it seem. Unlike science, which progresses incrementally and (in theory at least) never returns to its past limitations, art often advances by reviving obsolete styles and values. Such unprogressiveness implies a broader definition of contemporaneity than our own time often allows; postmodernism tends to be provincial in its idea of what makes art relevant to contemporary life. For many, it seems, art is supposed to be an indiscriminate mirroring of what surrounds us: commercialism, built-in obsolescence, and journalistic sound bites—reinforced by an often unspoken, to say nothing of unexamined, nihilism.

In such a climate it isn't surprising that a poet like Edwin Muir has faded from view. Not that he is completely forgotten in this country: Graywolf Press has kept his marvelous autobiography in print and, in 1992, reissued Muir's lectures on the relationship between poetry and society (*The Estate of Poetry*, introduced by John Haines). His collected poems, however, have not been issued in the United States since 1965. (*The Complete Poems*, edited and annotated by Peter Butter, was published in Scotland in 1991.) I first heard of Muir from an essay by Kathleen Raine in her collection *Defending Ancient Springs* (Lindisfarne Press, 1985, now out of print). And not since the early sixties, when writers such as Merton, Allen Tate, and Hayden Carruth were paying serious attention to Muir, has his poetry been discussed much or appreciated in U.S. journals. One reason for the lack of interest in Muir's poetry is its traditional, English and ballad-influenced prosody, which kept it obscure for many years even in Muir's own time. Its occasionally old-fashioned diction and

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inversions, and its sometimes stiffly iambic meter (Muir himself admitted that, having started writing poetry at thirty-five, he was painfully slow at developing a supple style) *can* be off-putting to any sensibility braced by Pound, Eliot, and their successors.

Muir's lack of technical innovativeness, however, isn't the only, or even the greatest difference between him and the creators of modernism. Everyone who knows Muir's work knows that he grew up as the son of a peasant farmer in the Orkneys, in one of the last communities in Europe practically untouched by Renaissance and Enlightenment culture—and that his poetry and prose are greatly affected, one might even say determined by the struggle Muir underwent when circumstances landed him in the middle of several modern industrial and political horrors. Like Eliot, Muir believed that contemporaneity requires a relation to the past, but the past to which Muir related his contemporary experience was not literary so much as ancestral and organic—"culture" for Muir meant everything from animal husbandry to Dante and Milton. He could afford to be less anxious about the relation of individual talent to tradition precisely because his tradition, while including elements of high culture, was more primary than the latter: it was based on the fundamental relationships between human beings living together in interdependent community with nature. Muir depicts his native community in his *Autobiography* (1954):

> I cannot say how much my idea of a good life was influenced by my early upbringing, but it seems to me that its sins were mere sins of the flesh, which are excusable, and not sins of the spirit. The farmers did not know ambition and the petty torments of ambition; they did not realize what competition was. . . . [T]hey helped one another with their work when help was required. . . . [T]hey had a culture made up of legend, folk-song, and the poetry and prose of the Bible; they had customs with which they sanctioned their instinctive feelings for the earth; their life was an order, and a good order.

This background explains why, while most other modern writers were, in Pound's words, writing from a fragmented stream, Muir was still vitally related to the lost world of social and cultural unity. When Muir wrote lines such as "But still from Eden springs the root / As clean as on the starting day," he was expressing a sentiment many writers believed or felt but few could assert with real conviction. Thus it came about that Muir was one of those poets, rare in any age, whose vocation it was to bear witness to a

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vision of radical innocence and the fate of it in the world. This, it seems to me, is another source of Muir's neglect in recent years: the postmodern aesthetic is too cynical, indecisive, and shackled by irony to take Muir seriously.

And yet the unusualness of Muir's poetry is surely one of the features that attracts its admirers—of which, no doubt, there are still many. His value is not in what he has to offer technically, or in his reflecting back to us our existential fears and fragmented identities; the special gift of Muir's poetry is that it reminds us of the possibility of a rooted life—"rooted" in all senses: geographical, ancestral, cultural, natural, spiritual. Muir was consistent in his romantic contempt for the modern idea of progress; he warned that, in a culture overdetermined by technological development, outward changes happen so fast that our primal identity becomes "indistinct. . . . [T]he imagination cannot pierce to it as easily as it once could." The constant metamorphosis of outer life brought about by technology obscures the essentials of human experience, which are remarkably consistent over time. In an essay called "The Poetic Imagination," published in *Essays on Literature and Society* (1949), Muir made a distinction between technological and human progress:

> Applied science shows us a world of consistent, mechanical progress. Machines give birth to ever new generations of machines, and the new machines are always better and more efficient than the old, and begin where the old left off. . . . But in the world of human beings all is different. . . . Every human being has to begin at the beginning, as his forebears did, with the same difficulties and pleasures, the same temptations, the same problem of good and evil, the same inclination to ask what life means.

Despite the measured tone of this passage, which Muir wrote in his late fifties, his actual, early confrontation with industrialized society was personally calamitous. From his teenage years, when his family was economically forced to move to Glasgow (four of them, including Muir's parents, died within the next few years), into his mid-thirties, Muir earned a living at various menial jobs, experiencing preunionized labor and modern urban poverty firsthand. One clerical job, for example, forced him to live in a town entirely dominated by the company for which he worked, a factory that burned the bones of slaughtered animals to use the

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ashes for making glue. Muir describes the freight cars full of bones "festooned with maggots," and the rank stench of rotting flesh from which it was impossible to escape anywhere in town. It's not surprising that Muir turned during this period to Nietzsche and socialism, the former, as he realized afterward, providing him with a rationalized fantasy of power in the face of overwhelming, impotent despair; and that the aphorisms he wrote at his desk at work were bitter and ironic, unlike anything he was to write later.

What *is* remarkable is that Muir did not become a social realist, as did Auden, Day-Lewis, Spender, and other related British poets during the thirties, most of whom didn't know anything close to what Muir knew about poverty. Instead, he applied his native gift for mythological thinking—i.e., for discerning large, symbolic patterns of meaning in life—to integrating his childhood and his adult experiences:

The Covenant

The covenant of god and animal,
The frieze of fabulous creatures winged and crowned,
And in the midst the woman and the man—

Lost long ago in fields beyond the Fall—
Keep faith in sleep-walled night and there are found
On our long journey back where we began.

Then the heraldic crest of nature lost
Shines out again until the weariless wave
Roofs with its sliding horror all that realm.

What jealousy, what rage could overwhelm
The golden lion and lamb and vault a grave
For innocence, innocence past defence or cost?

Again and again, Muir's poems, as here, address the traditional dichotomy of innocence and innocence lost, often using Bible stories, especially Eden and the Fall, to communicate the sense of a chasm between living in unity with others and with God and

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nature, and living in isolation, dislocation, and dis-ease. Once he had regained the psychological vantage point of his childhood experience—after having a breakdown in London, subsequent Jungian analysis, and finally leaving Britain with his wife, Willa—he referred to it in his poetry, usually metaphorically, as the ground or touchstone or prototype-of-wholeness against which he measured contemporary disturbance, flux, and change.

An interesting essay could be written about the animals in Muir's poetry; farmer's son that he was, he rarely depicts them in a Rousseauistic wild state, but rather, in terms of humankind's dependence on them. Muir's most widely anthologized poem, "The Horses" (which Eliot referred to as a "great poem of the nuclear age"), treats this theme, and the related one of alienation and reconciliation between human beings and nature, with a masterfully paced narrative and vivid, tangible detail. To appreciate the poem fully, one must recall that Muir wrote it in the 1950s, the coldest period of the Cold War. He sets up the poem in the first few lines with the contrast between unity and division that will structure the whole piece.

Barely a twelvemonth after
The seven days war that put the world to sleep,
Late in the evening the strange horses came.

The narrative continues:

By then we had made our covenant with silence,
But in the first few days it was so still
We listened to our breathing and were afraid.
On the second day
The radios failed; we turned the knobs; no answer.

Note how the last line above captures in just a few words the irony that social isolation has increased despite modern civilization's enhanced means of communication. And the first inkling of reconciliation with the animals is depicted later in this poem with lovely simplicity and strength:

Late in the summer the strange horses came.
We heard a distant tapping on the road,

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intellect, is one of the aspects of Muir that makes his work so clear-sighted and sound. Unlike many mystics—and Muir certainly made no attempt to disguise his metaphysical passions—he didn't succumb to the extremism that would insist that all art should be metaphysical. In his critical writings, he was as likely to extol Austen, Thackeray, and Rabelais, as Hölderlin, and he disliked Valéry for being too remote from everyday life. Muir's equanimity and balance made it possible for him to appreciate a very wide range of styles and views; his 1926 volume of critical studies, *Transition*, is remarkable for its insightful and jargon-free characterizations of Joyce, Lawrence, Woolf, and others. This tolerance for aesthetic and philosophical views markedly different from his own, along with his uncanny knack for illuminating generalization, are the qualities that made Muir one of the best critics of his time, and the most independent from the methods of the New Criticism that Muir never liked, believing it reinforced (because it overintellectualized its subject) the already widening gap between writer and audience. Muir resembled the mature Yeats in his allegiance to and faith in physical, temporal life, although (also like Yeats) his poetry shares many features in common with the symbolist aesthetic that has appealed so much to modern poets prone to philosophical idealism—expressive concentration, interpenetration of idea and image, and spareness of quotidian detail. Muir's truest voice is a blend of earthy homeliness and visionary idealism; his is a romanticism of the second half of life. A key to Muir's Christianity, in fact, was his admiration for the doctrine of Incarnation; he blamed John Knox, the Calvinist, for betraying that teaching and thereby keeping the Renaissance, with all its secular revelations, out of Scotland: "The Word made flesh here is made flesh again, / A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook" ("The Incarnate One").

For Muir, culture is the zone in which mind and nature, the timeless and the temporal meet and are reconciled. This is why he didn't agree with Auden and other modernists who claimed that poetry is "useless." Useless, yes, if by that we mean *utilitarian*; but incomparably useful when we remember that without art—without *gratuitous beauty*—a society can have no living dialogue with its own depths and heights. Muir believed that one of the tasks of art was to renew the ligatures that keep these connections

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A deepening drumming; it stopped, went on again
And at the corner changed to hollow thunder.
We saw the heads
Like a wild wave charging and were afraid.

The horses are "strange," it turns out, simply because we estranged ourselves from them. The poem itself makes clear they are not wild: "We had sold our horses in our fathers' time / To buy new tractors." And the following excerpt from a letter Muir wrote in July 1958 further clarifies that he wished to emphasize the relationship between the human and the natural world. The horses are "good plough-horses and still have a memory of the world before the war. I try to suggest they are looking for their old human companionship." Yet the speakers of the poem, a collective "we" (a common device in Muir's poetry), respond to the horses' return with fear of their instinctual energy, presumably because the machines with which they replaced them, the "dank sea-monsters" now "moldering away . . . like other loam," did not require them to exercise their capacity for relating to living things. The speakers of the poem, then, don't trust the horses' return.

Now they were strange to us
As fabulous steeds on an ancient shield
Or illustrations in a book of knights.
We did not dare go near them. Yet they waited,
Stubborn and shy, as if they had been sent
By an old command to find our whereabouts
And that long-lost archaic companionship.

With remarkable economy, this passage concretizes the idea of reconciliation—it finds an objective correlative for it. Thus, Muir can conclude the poem with a specific image of renewal:

Since then they have pulled our ploughs and borne our loads
But that free servitude still can pierce our hearts.
Our life is changed; their coming our beginning.

This deep acceptance of our inextricable closeness to animals and nature, always coupled with a passion for human culture and

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current and vital, and that civilization itself cannot survive without such renewal.

His own unique brand of political poem—and he wrote some of the most notable of the early Cold War years—was based on these notions. "The Usurpers" is one of several poems Muir wrote about his experience of postwar Prague, where he was director of the British Council Institute from 1945 to 1948. A Czech writer, a friend of the Muirs, had shown them a photograph of some young Gestapo men, one of whom had interrogated, tortured, and murdered her husband. She showed the Muirs her husband's shirt, covered with blood and torn scraps of flesh, mailed to her by the Gestapo after her husband's death. Muir wrote of the men he saw in the photograph:

> They all seemed to be in their late twenties, and it suddenly came into my mind that they had been bred by the first world war. . . . [Our friend] pointed at one young man and said without expression: that is the one who strangled my husband. But it might have been any of the others. They stared out from the photograph with the confidence of the worthless who find power left in their hands like a tip hastily dropped by a frightened world.

Muir's poem about the photograph is a first-person dramatization of the sort of mentality he ascribes to Regan, Goneril, and Edmund in his essay on *King Lear* (published the same year, 1949, as the collection in which "The Usurpers" appeared), that mentality which sees "things in a continuous present divested of all associations, denuded of memory and the depth which memory gives to life, . . . claim[ing] a liberty which is proper to nature but not to society." "The Usurpers" depicts how shockingly casual the speakers are about dismissing centuries of accumulated knowledge:

> There is no answer. We do here what we will
> And there is no answer. This our liberty
> No one has known before, nor could have borne,
> For it is rooted in this deepening silence
> That is our work and has become our kingdom.
> If there were an answer, how could we be free?

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It was not hard to still the ancestral voices:
A careless thought, less than a thought could do it.

This perspective, invaluable to the empirical methods of pure and applied science (which are based on systematic suppression of subjectivity), devastates human life, which thrives on imagination, stories, and values that can be felt or intuited but not measured. The Gestapo men, like the power-obsessed characters in *King Lear*, boast of a

liberty
No one has known before, nor could have borne,
For it is rooted in this deepening silence
That is our work and has become our kingdom.

Dissociated from a culture that conveys a sense of meaning and relatedness, the speakers mistakenly believe that this alienation constitutes genuine liberty: "We dare do all we think, / Since there's no one to check us, here or elsewhere." And the end of the poem implies that the speakers' naturalistic bias leads, ironically, to a cold objectification of nature.

It is a lie that they are witnesses,
That the mountains judge us, brooks tell tales about us.
We have thought sometimes the rocks looked strangely on us,
Have fancied that the waves were angry with us,
Heard dark runes murmuring in the autumn wind,
Muttering and murmuring like old toothless women
That prophesied against us in ancient tongues.

These are imaginations. We are free.

The last line is especially telling: "freedom," in this sense, requires the contemptuous dismissal by reason of all so-called superstitions of the past. Another of Muir's poems, "The Cloud," satirizes political systems based on this rationalistic mindset. It was written during Muir's last year in Prague, shortly after the Soviet takeover. The Communists, although their "impersonality was . . . not as . . . cruel . . . as the Nazis," were able to impose their system

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only by carefully censoring all spontaneity of personal relationship and feeling—a ploy Muir experienced firsthand when two government officials attended and took notes on his lectures at the university. For Muir, the Communists, like the Nazis, "called up a vast image of impersonal power, the fearful shape of our modern inhumanity."

> Their categories, the working class, the capitalists, the bourgeoisie, the communists, the anti-communists, were far more real to them than . . . human beings. Their moral judgments were judgments of their categories. . . . They could understand a good worker, but a good human being was an abstraction which fell outside their sphere of thought.

One day Muir and his wife were driving to a writers' retreat at Dobris Castle near Prague, when they rounded a corner and saw in a field "A young man harrowing, hidden in dust; he seemed / A prisoner walking in a moving cloud / Made by himself for his own purposes." Muir, of course, knew nothing of this man's actual political convictions. The lines are a satirical description of the "worker" that Communist ideology supposedly defended. Muir is applying the anti-imaginative constructs of Communism to one of its own, to show how it failed to provide the liberation of spirit it promised.

> And there he grew and was as if exalted
> To more than man, yet not, not glorified:
> A pillar of dust moving in dust; no more.
> The bushes by the roadside were encrusted
> With a hard sheath of dust.
> We looked and wondered; the dry cloud moved on
> With its interior image.
> Presently we found
> A road that brought us to the Writers' House,
> And there a preacher from Urania
> (Sad land where hope each day is killed by hope)
> Praised the good dust, man's ultimate salvation.

A social order that deprives human activity of its sacramental dimension, in other words, is dead. Communist ideology, Muir

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suggests, condemned the very person it claimed to free; it limited him to an identity entirely circumscribed by "the biological sequence," so that he could imagine himself only as "a blindfold mask on a pillar of dust."

Both "The Usurpers" and "The Cloud" are typical of the sort of political poetry Muir wrote: the subjects are universalized; the images and ideas, with few exceptions, could apply as easily to any place or time with similar circumstances. Muir almost always looked for the essentials behind and beneath surface conditions; his poems remind us that politics, societies, and history are "fables" as well as literal "stories." (The early version of Muir's autobiography was called *The Story and the Fable* because he wanted to tell not only his life's events, but their context in the larger picture of things—would that more contemporary memoirs would follow suit!) In Muir's political poetry, history is reimagined as an internal event. I don't mean to imply that this is the way political poetry, or poetry in general "should" be written—although I do believe that the greatness of poetry is measured by it. Muir himself, as I explained above, was very far from being dogmatic about his approach. My point is that Muir's very rare gift for grasping the deeper significance of twentieth-century events and mentalities—and for depicting them with economy, profound imagery, and, especially in his last two books, literary art—is ignored to our detriment. Muir depicted our time as one of transition, an *interregnum* of civilization, during which the danger is great that we can forget altogether the meanings and associations that make *human* life possible. His personal struggle to assimilate (for he never really adapted to it) this hyper-technological century resulted in some of the most singular writing of our time, immensely useful to those of us who, even if we have never known any other world, are trying to understand, articulate, and address what is wrong with modern life. Surely, to move forward we can't afford to be sentimental or overly nostalgic about what we've lost; but it is equally true that forgetting it limits us to our own myopia. Muir's poetry and critical writings are there to help us remember.

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ALAN SULLIVAN AND TIMOTHY MURPHY

The Fire-Drake

The Translators' Tale or How Many Angles Can Dance on the Head of a Finn?

Timothy Murphy and I have come to *Beowulf* from very different angles. During his boyhood in Moorhead, Minnesota, Tim conceived a passion for the folk music of the Irish, the Scots, and their descendants in Canada and Appalachia. Later, when his voice crashed, he turned to the poetry of Frost and Yeats, but the Scottish Border ballads and Robert Burns have always remained dear to him. Meanwhile, in New York City, I was captivated by the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, author of the epic fantasy *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien had derived his mythic realm from a boyhood passion of his own—he called it a vice—which undergirded all his subsequent fiction. He invented imaginary languages, drawing upon his scholarship in Old English, Old Norse, and Old High German to shape his vocabularies and his runes.

As a student at Yale, Tim came under the tutelage of Robert Penn Warren, who pressed his pupil to memorize poetry until the young man's repertoire approached 30,000 lines. Not all those lines were Modern English. Some were Greek (the opening of the *Iliad*), and others were Old or Middle English (favorite passages from *Beowulf*, Chaucer, and various medieval lyrics). At the same time I was enrolled at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, the city where Tim and I met in 1973. An indifferent student, I was cutting classes to write songs and play guitar when *Beowulf* was taught. But Tolkien had already given me a grounding in Old English, though I didn't realize it for nearly thirty years.

Our translation began almost inadvertently, when Tim decided to try his hand on the passages he had memorized so long before.

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As his long-time editor, I peered over his shoulder at Klaeber's scholarly edition of the text. Delving into Old English was a spooky experience for me. The language seemed almost uncannily familiar. Soon Tim trusted me to pursue the project on my own, though I kept good company. Donaldson's prose version, Alexander's crib, and Chickering's *en face* verse translation were all at hand. Although he was too busy to collaborate full-time, Tim had fastened from the outset upon four principles for our translation. (1) It would be written in four-beat lines, like the original, though differing somewhat in metrical detail. (2) It would follow a loosened variant of the Scop's Rule, alliterating three times in most lines, but using other patterns of alliteration as well. (3) It would employ modern syntax, with some inversion for rhetorical effect. (4) Vocabulary would be confined wherever possible to words of Germanic origin.

Scholars still argue over exactly how *Beowulf* might have sounded, but they agree broadly that Old English relied more than Modern English on *quantitative*, or time-based measure, while verse in Modern English is more *qualitative*, or stress-based. The rhythm of *Beowulf* cannot be replicated in Modern English. The translator must employ a different metrical principle while attempting to recapture the force of the original. Most scholars of Anglo-Saxon have not been skillful enough as poets to succeed. Homer and Vergil were impressively translated into iambic pentameter by Chapman, Dryden, Pope and Fitzgerald. The *Beowulf* poet has been less fortunate. He wrote in alliterative tetrameter, which was standard for Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse epic. Each line consists of two half-lines divided by a strong pause. Each half-line contains two principal stresses, highlighted by alliteration. A half-line can be as simple as "*beortum byrnum*" or as complex as "*þat hio hyre hearmdagas.*" But whether they run to four syllables or eight, these half-lines are isochronous, having roughly the same duration when spoken.

Like rhyme, alliteration affords both mnemonic aid and aural pleasure. "The Rule of the Scop," when followed strictly, requires that both stresses in half-line "a" alliterate with the first stress in half-line "b." As he began to work with the text, Tim altered the rule to fit the characteristics of Modern English. There were three stressed alliterations in the majority of his lines, but he placed them in any of the four possible configurations (xxxy, xxyx, xyxx,

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yxxx), and sometimes he accepted alliteration on a secondary accent. Where there were only two alliterations, he usually bound them to others in a preceding or succeeding line. Often he used two pairs of alliterative words on the stress points of a line, arranged in one permutation or another: xxyy, xyyx, xyxy. In such cases he might also incorporate one or more x and/or y alliterations in adjoining lines. The objective was to weave a web of sound, not to follow a mechanical rule. And the *Beowulf* poet himself indulged in such variations, though less frequently.

Syntax is a continual challenge for translators of *Beowulf.* Germanic languages do not use word order to indicate the parts of speech. Instead they are inflected: number, case, gender, tense and voice are indicated by the spellings of words and the suffixes attached to them. Despite this superfluity of syllables, most translators have followed *Beowulf*'s line count, a practice that impels them to pad the poem. And few of them have dared meddle with the text enough to straighten out the syntax for modern readers. Groping our way toward a version that reads well in Modern English, we have striven to keep hold of the poem's sense. Though we change nouns to adjectives, and adjectives to adverbs, though we resequence clauses and omit conjunctions, such grammatical maneuvers need not alter materially what the poem *says.*

In vocabulary we have taken our cues from Tolkien, whose work helped familiarize a generation of readers with near-archaisms like "byrnie" and "jerkin." To eschew such words would impoverish the text. *Beowulf* is full of artifacts from another time, for which our language lacks succinct terms. Happily, Modern English remains rich in words with Nordic or Germanic roots—far more of them, in fact, than the *Beowulf* poet employed. Some are reasonably synonymous with words found in the poem, allowing us to imbue the translation with the sound and feel of an elder (sometimes an eldritch) tongue. At the same time we have avoided Latin and French derivatives as much as possible. More than 90 percent of words in our *Beowulf* come from the *losers* (Old English), not the *victors* (Latin) at the Battle of Hastings. Unfortunately, "triumph," "honor," "glory" and "fame" arrived with the Norman French. There are no alternatives in Modern English. However "hoard," "wrath" and "death" still sound exactly as they did in the mouths of Scops (performing bards) a millennium ago.

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Checking the origins of words, I learned about the curious journeys they have taken from their obscure sources. Both words comprising the term "fire-drake" come from the Old English side of our language; but "drake," now nearly extinct, derives from the Latin "*draco*," also the root of the more familiar but more altered word, "dragon." The Latin word passed into Old English by way of the Rhine; yet it may have once travelled the other way, from an earlier, Germanic source. Words hitchhike along trade routes, and their derivation traces the commerce between nations.

In *Beowulf*, the dragon is the last and most complex of the three supernatural villains the hero must vanquish. Like Grendel's mother, the dragon has a legitimate grievance, at least in terms of a pagan value-system. It does not emerge from its fastness and assail the Geats without cause. It has lain quietly, harming no one, until disturbed by a thief. But its wrath and destructiveness are disproportionate to the offense that has provoked them. As hoard-guardian, enraged beyond measure by the loss of a single flagon, the dragon represents greed. Even Beowulf is not wholly immune to gold-lust, though the vice is tempered in him by concern for his people's welfare. He would not hoard the wealth, but share it. Nevertheless, he too is touched by the treasure's curse.

In another aspect, the dragon also personifies death. As an uncommon man, Beowulf is marked for an uncommon end. The dragon is his destiny, and he senses it has arisen not only for the stolen flagon, but for him. Yet he must seek the monster out after it retreats to its lair. His duty as king demands no less. For a moment, seeing the dreadful place where death awaits him, Beowulf almost succumbs to despair; then he rallies his strength for the final speech to his young knights. As he speaks, his pride is restored. Death cannot sully what he has achieved in life, so he strides forth alone to meet it. The dragon is terrible and majestic; yet it too is a living creature, and its armor has a chink. With Wiglaf's help, Beowulf fells the foe and fulfills his fate, slaying Death and dying in the act, like the Redeemer. His sacrifice lowers the curtain on a pagan past and rings in the Christian era for northern Europe.

ALAN SULLIVAN

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Lines 2510–2709

Now Beowulf spoke his last battle-boast:
"In boyhood I braved bitter clashes;
still in old age I would seek out strife
and gain glory guarding my folk
if the man-bane comes from his cave to meet me."

Then he turned to his troop for the final time,
bidding farewell to bold helmet-bearers,
fast in friendship: "No sword would I wear,
no weapon at all to ward off the worm
if I knew how to fight this fiendish foe
as I grappled with Grendel one bygone night.
But here I shall find fierce battle-fire
and breath envenomed, therefore I bear
this mail-coat and shield. I shall not shy
from standing my ground when I greet the hoard-guard,
follow what will at the foot of his wall.
I shall face the fiend with a firm heart.
Let every man's Ruler reckon my fate:
words are worthless against the war-flyer.
Bide by the barrow, safe in your byrnies,
and watch, my warriors, which of us two
will better bear the brunt of our clash.
This war is not yours; it is meted to me,
matching my strength, man against monster.
I shall do this deed undaunted by death
and shall get you gold or else get my ending,
borne off in battle, the bane of your lord."

The hero arose, helmed and hardy,
a war-king clad in shield and corslet.
He strode strongly under the stone-cliff:
no faint-hearted man, to face it unflinching!
Stalwart soldier of so many marches,
unshaken when shields were crushed in the clash,
he saw between stiles an archway where steam
burst like a boiling tide from the barrow,
woeful for one close to the worm-hoard.

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He would not linger long unburned by the lurker
or safely slip through the searing lair.
Then a battle-cry broke from Beowulf's breast
as his rightful rage was roused for the reckoning.
His challenge sounded under stark stone
where the hateful hoard-guard heard in his hollow
the clear-voiced call of a man coming.

No quarter was claimed; no quarter given.
First the beast's breath blew hot from the barrow
as battle-bellows boomed underground.
The stone-house stormer swung up his shield
at the ghastly guardian. Then the dragon's grim heart
kindled for conflict. Uncoiling, he came
seeking the Stalwart; but the swordsman had drawn
the keen-edged blade bequeathed him for combat,
and each foe confronted the other with fear.
His will unbroken, the warlord waited
behind his tall shield, helm and hauberk.
With fitful twistings the fire-drake hastened
fatefully forward. His fender held high,
Beowulf felt the blaze blister through
hotter and sooner than he had foreseen.
So for the first time fortune was failing
the mighty man in the midst of a struggle.
Wielding his sword, he struck at the worm
and his fabled blade bit to the bone
through blazoned hide: bit and bounced back,
no match for the foe in this moment of need.

The peerless prince was hard-pressed in response,
for his bootless blow had maddened the monster
and fatal flames shot further than ever,
lighting the land. No praise for the warlord's
prowess in battle: the blade he brandished
had failed in the fray though forged from iron.
No easy end for the son of Ecgetheow:
against his will he would leave this world
to dwell elsewhere, as every man must
when his days are done. Swiftly the death-dealer

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moved to meet him. From the murderous breast
bellows of breath belched fresh flames.
Enfolded in fire, he who formerly
ruled a whole realm had no one to help him
hold off the heat, for his hand-picked band
of princelings had fled, fearing to face
the foe with their lord. Loving honor
less than their lives, they hid in the holt.
But one among them grieved for the Geats
and balked at quitting his kinsman, the king.

This one was Wiglaf, son of Weostan,
beloved shield-bearer born in Scylf-land.
Seeing his liege-lord suffering sorely
with war-mask scorched by the searing onslaught,
the thankful thane thought of the boons
his kinsman bestowed: the splendid homestead
and folk-rights his father formerly held.
No shirker could stop him from seizing his shield
of yellow linden and lifting the blade
Weostan won when he slew Eanmund,
son of Othere. Spoils of that struggle,
sword and scabbard, smithwork of giants,
a byrnie of ring-mail and bright-burnished helm
were granted as gifts, a thane's war-garb,
for Onela never acknowledged his nephews
but struck against both of his brother's sons.
When Eadgils caught the killer of kin,
Weostan fled. Woeful and friendless,
he saved that gear for seasons of strife,
foreseeing his son someday might crave
sword and corslet. He came to his kinsman,
the prince of the Geats, and passed on his heirlooms,
hoping Wiglaf would wear them with honor.
Old then, and wise, he went from the world.

This war was the first young Wiglaf would fight
helping the king. His heart would not quail
nor weapon fail as the foe would find
going against him; but he made his grim mood

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known to the men: "I remember the meadhall
where beer-swillers swore with many a boast
to the lord who lavished these rings on his liegemen.
We promised to pay for princely trappings
by staunchly wielding sword-blades in war
if need should arise. Now we are needed
by him who chose, from the whole of his host,
twelve for this trial, trusting our claims
as warriors worthy of wearing our blades,
bearing keen spears. Our king has come here
bent on battling the man-bane alone,
because among warriors one keeper of kinfolk
has done, undaunted, the most deeds of daring.
But this day our lord needs dauntless defenders
so long as the fearful fires flow forth.
God knows I would gladly give my own body
for flames to enfold with the gold-giver.
Shameful, to shoulder our shields homeward!
First we must fell this fearsome foe
and deliver the life of our weathered lord.
Is it right that one man be wrathfully racked
for his former feats, fall in this fight
guarding the Geats? Helm and mail-shirt
shield and blade, we both shall share."

So speaking, he stormed through the reek of smoke,
with helmet on head, to help his lord.
"Beloved Beowulf, bear up your blade.
You pledged in your youth, powerful prince,
never to let your luster lessen
while life was left you. Now summon your strength;
stand steadfast. I shall stand with you."

After these words the worm was enraged.
For a second time the spiteful specter
flew at his foe, and he wreathed in flames
the hated human he hungered to harm.
His dreadful fire-wind drove in a wave,
charring young Wiglaf's shield to the boss,
nor might a byrnie bar that breath

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from burning the brave spear-bearer's breast.
Wiglaf took cover close to his kinsman,
shielded by iron when linden was cinder.
Then the war-king, recalling past conquests,
struck with full strength straight at the head.
His battle-sword, Naegling, stuck there and split,
shattered in combat, so sharp was the shock
to Beowulf's great gray-mottled blade.
He never was granted the gift of a sword
as hard and strong as the hand which held it.
I have heard he broke blood-hardened brands,
so the weapon-bearer was none the better.

The fearful fire-drake, scather of strongholds,
flung himself forward a final time,
wild with wounds yet wily and sly.
In the heat of the fray, he hurtled headlong
to fasten his fangs in the foe's throat.
Beowulf's life-blood came bursting forth
on those terrible tusks. Just then, I am told,
the second warrior sprang from his side,
a man born for battle proving his mettle,
keen to strengthen his kinsman in combat.
He took no heed of the hideous head
scorching his hand as he hit lower down.
The sword sank in, patterned and plated;
the flames of the foe faltered, faded.
Though gored and giddy, Beowulf gathered
strength once again and slipped out his sheath-knife,
the keen killing-blade he kept in his corslet.
Then the Geats' guardian gutted the dragon,
felling that fiend with the help of his friend,
two kinsmen together besting the terror.
So should a thane succor his sovereign.

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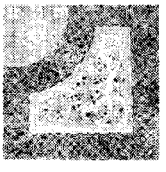

BASIL BUNTING ON POETRY

EDITED BY PETER MAKIN

Basil Bunting on Poetry collects two series of lectures that the British poet delivered in 1968 and 1974. Tracing the development of an English poetry governed by families of stress-groups from *Beowulf* down to Wyatt, Wordsworth, Whitman, Pound, and Zukofsky, the lectures focus on writing and hearing poetry rather than on literary-historical concerns. Peter Makin expands upon and annotates the lectures with additional comments drawn from Bunting's writings.

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N. S. THOMPSON

Here Comes Everybody: British Poetry Today

Thirty years ago young poets on both sides of the Atlantic could look across the water and find a roughly equivalent muse holding sway on the other side. In the introduction to his anthology *The New Poetry* (1962), Al Alvarez had championed Berryman, Lowell and Plath over the Movement poets, and roundly chastised British poetry for its allegiance to what he called "the gentility principle." It was time for British poetry to come out from behind its neatly clipped privet hedge. The following decade saw the Liverpool poets gesture to the Beats, the Newcastle poets to Pound and Zukovsky, while many others took up the Confessional poets on the one hand and the emerging strengths of Hughes and Heaney on the other. At many levels, poets were reading, admiring and corresponding with each other. What was most noticeable was that poetry had become "popular": it was accessible, courted its audience (especially the youthful one) with references to pop culture and, like the popular media itself, was quite ready to incorporate sensationalism into the agenda.

In the years following much that has happened to influence poetry in Britain has also happened in America: the emergence and consolidation of cultural diversity; in the academy the hegemony of critical theory and now cultural studies; the boom in creative writing courses and literary festivals, at the same time that—almost paradoxically—under pressure from accountancy-driven holding companies, metropolitan publishers closed down poetry lists, and many small presses have come and gone. What has remained from the 1960s is the persistent pressure to be "popular" and to perform for an immediate and popular audience. It might be asked what a popular audience might be, and what it might like to read. The foreword to the *Forward Book of*

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Poetry 1999 (an annual anthology stemming from the Forward poetry prizes) gives the idea:

> Our mass sampling [for the prizes] was a roller coaster ride with a mesmerising view of every possible facet of life at the cusp of the millennium: a father's agony over his daughter's anorexia, the mass suicide at Jonestown, blokish [*sic*] feminism, the pain and gain of passion, deportation, deprivation, space exploration, even Zen in the Outer Hebrides.

The writer continues by saying that the competition was "truly open" with poems written by:

> poet-parsons, space explorers, ramblers, jazzy urban guerrillas, gay activists, teachers, political dissidents as well as ordinary people bringing extraordinary epiphanies from their lives.

It all sounds great fun, a great clanjamfry of modern life. Should we expect anything else? What is perhaps more troubling than the emphasis on contemporary subject matter is that subject matter itself seems to be the heart and soul of poetic creation. There is no mention of any evaluative criteria, no mention of discrimination among the works of this jolly band of poet-everybodies, nor that there could be a *bad* poem about a daughter's anorexia or about deportation or deprivation.

The sense of an all-inclusive political agenda is more firmly in place in recent authoritative anthologies. Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford, editors of *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* (1998), call their Introduction "The Democratic Voice," noting the many vibrant tongues coming from previously marginalized places as if a significant revolution had taken place:

> A sense of local accents, dialects, languages attaining their own authority, at the same time as ideas of absolute central authority dissolve, characterizes the poetry of the period and plays a strong part in the evolution of the democratic voice.

Along with many leading critics, they read literary culture as if it were a political landscape with real power at the center to sway and control and—most important—with an agenda to keep the margins out. This reading is not a proven reality. One has only to

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think of a Catholic farmer's son from County Derry taken up by an august London publishing house, later voted Professor of Poetry at Oxford, to say nothing of his receiving a Nobel Prize. In literary culture, the margins are always taking over the center, are always refreshing it, while perhaps ultimately taking definition from that center, no matter how much a theoretical, ideological or fantastical construction it may be. Quoted in another recent anthology's introduction, the late Donald Davie, a Yorkshireman, was sceptical of a center "allegedly located in London and Oxbridge . . . [that] is supposed to be deeply satisfying to the English themselves." In real terms the notion of an old imperialist center was moribund by 1945; and although "Empire loyalism" was a mind-set for many years in some sectors of the population, the voting in of a Labor government on a welfare state ticket in that same year signalled a complete change in British political culture, a new appreciation of "society" and a new commitment to the common man. It is, of course, a signal irony that Armitage and Crawford talk of the recent past as one in which "ideas of central authority dissolve" when under the years of Thatcher government local authority power was curtailed, a centralized (and much vilified) poll tax was introduced and many other decisions (notably in health and education) were located in Whitehall. On the literary side, it is also salutary to note that poets from Chaucer to Wordsworth to Eliot have advocated a return to common speech against a perceived scleroticism in poetic language. It is also worth repeating that there have been no mute, inglorious Miltons in the provinces. Over the generations, poets as diverse as Dylan Thomas and R. S. Thomas (Wales), Edwin Muir and Douglas Dunn (Scotland) and Louis MacNeice and Paul Muldoon (Northern Ireland) have all become central reading. A further irony is that many of the critics and poets who claim to speak for marginalized voices were educated in the very places which they claim are the centers of cultural oppression. There seems to be a confusion over the terms political and cultural. Life does not preclude these writers wanting to satirize and criticize whatever they see as unjust, but let them not claim the same oppressions for themselves as the genuinely culturally and educationally disadvantaged.

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Speaking for "the people," especially the oppressed, brings a peculiar dilemma for the poet. The problem is one that has been long voiced by a poet whose voice claims cultural oppression. Born a working-class boy in Leeds, Tony Harrison was able to rise from his origins by a university education, and often finds himself voicing paradoxical statements about his allegiance to a working-class culture of sympathy and common understanding, yet critical of that class for its lack of learning and critical insight. At its most poignant, this tension centers on the differences between Harrison and his father as expressed in the sonnet "Book Ends," when they have to face each other on the day the poet's mother died:

> The 'scholar' me, you worn out on poor pay,
> only our silence made us seem a pair.
> . . . . . .
> Back in our silences and and sullen looks,
> for all the Scotch we drink, what's still between's
> not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books.

As a cultural fact, the most truly emergent voices in Britain have been from the Caribbean and Asian communities (the former producing more poets, the latter more novelists). Here a similar problem exists. Where do we locate the voice of the university-educated black poet who is speaking for his community? When Linton Kwesi Johnston is able to write the protest poem "Inglan is a bitch" in the voice of a fifty-five-year-old unemployed worker, that projected worker's frustrations are mirrored by those of other communities, they are not peculiarly his own nor his community's:

> Mi know dem have work, work in abundant
> yet still, dem mek mi redundant
> now, at fifty-five mi gettin' quite ol'
> Yet still, dem sen' mi fi goh draw dole

The poet here is writing in a projected voice that is not his own, but the work does not achieve a fully rounded quality that a dramatic monologue might accomplish, where the reader's sympathy for the man's plight might be drawn out further than for his economic relationship to society alone (however important that

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may be). Equally, the sentiment could be mirrored by anyone unemployed, as we see in Ian Duhig's poem, "Jungle," based on a children's nursery rhyme:

> Down in the jungle, London Town,
> Hope and Anchor, Cricklewood Crown,
> Elephant and Castle, Rising Sun,
> promises, promises, bugger all done.
> Down in the jungle accommodation tied:
> lost my bar job, I'm back outside.

One feels frustrated with the sloganeering adopted in this kind of poetry, especially when it seems lame compared with the inventiveness that "rap" is sometimes able to achieve, and where it points to a cultural antagonist that is as threatening as Quixote's windmills. One can perhaps have sympathy with poets wishing to cultivate an audience, claiming allegiance with a populist view, but where this masks complex realities and provides no better analysis of the human condition than an attitude, then that sympathy is the less.

Although writing over a decade ago, the other side of this attitudinizing is perhaps best enunciated by Heaney himself in an essay, "The Fully Exposed Poem," published in *The Government of the Tongue* (1988):

> In spite of a period of castigation about the necessity for "intelligence" and "irony," poetry in English has not moved all that far from the shelter of the Romantic tradition. Even our self-mocking dandies pirouette to a narcotic music. The dream's the thing, not the diagnosis. Inwardness, yearnings and mergings of the self towards nature, cadences that drink at spots of time—in general the hopes of poets and readers still realize themselves within contexts like these. We still expect the poetic imagination to be sympathetic rather than analytic. "Intellect" still tends to summon its rhyme from Wordsworth's pejorative "dissect."

Like all artists, poets have to write about the realities of life. British poets have written about gardens, streets, and famously about a country churchyard. They have also written about trains and boats and planes. At their best they analyze and dissect,

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bringing insight and clarity not the death of vision. Marvell's persona sits in his garden until he feels his mind

> Annihilating all that's made
> To a green thought in a green shade.

Swift's street vignette in "A Description of the Morning" brings with it a brilliant social analysis:

> Now hardly here and there a hackney coach
> Appearing, showed the ruddy morn's approach.
> Now Betty from her master's bed has flown,
> And softly stole to discompose her own.
> The slipshod prentice from his master's floor
> Had pared the dirt, and sprinkled round the floor.

Similarly, despite the pervasive "reek of buttoned carriage-cloth," Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings" provides us with an analysis of life, as well as portraying the aspirations of ordinary people. In all these poems taking the humble, mundane or simply usual, these poets achieve two things. By a process of selection they turn the scene into a good deal more than description alone and thus transform it into Arnold's suggestion that poetry be a "criticism of life."

In the Preface to his *Poems* (1853), Matthew Arnold noted the Aristotelian observation that man takes pleasure in imitation and argued that:

> Any accurate representation may therefore be expected to be interesting; but, if the representation be a poetical one, more than this is demanded. It is demanded, not only that it shall interest, but also that it shall inspirit and rejoice the reader. . . .

Arnold was not advocating a poetry of the Victorian hymnal, merely pointing out the artistic dangers of the representation of alienation, horror and pain:

> What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by

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> incident, hope or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done.

For this reason he excluded his own dramatic poem "Empedocles on Etna" from the 1853 collection, saying:

> In such situations [as the above], there is inevitably something morbid, in description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also.

If in our democratic age the old heroic ideals of elevated language, and the appeal of history, culture and custom on which tragedy is based are more closed than open to us, Arnold still has a point. How do we transform quotidian experience, be it pain or pleasure, into art? In his editorial to a recent issue of *Poetry Review* looking back at the century's poetry, Peter Forbes said that it is a "documentary age." But is the poet merely to go along with what Thomas Hardy said in his Preface to *Poems of the Past and Present* (1901), perhaps not realizing the dangers he could be allowing:

> Unadjusted impressions have their value, and the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change.

The present writer is not alone in failing to see where the unadjusted impressions of Peter Reading's work may have artistic value, as in this example from the much anthologized *Ukelele Music* (1985), where references to the music hall instrument provide an inane Greek chorus to the catalogue of daily horrors such as this street assault on a mother and daughter:

> Promptly the mother gave over her gold wedding ring, also
> three pounds in cash and a watch (silver, engraved 'My True
> Love'),
>
> but the attackers slashed Sharen twice more—in the mouth,
> and a deep cut
> neatly round one chubby knee. Then they strolled leisurely off.

For all the outrage this elicits, it seems to be little more than a newspaper account. Although equally pessimistic about man's

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inhumanity to man, Geoffrey Hill's work is a testment to what can still be done with history, culture and custom, although the strain of the civilized approach in *Canaan* (1996) is apparent. Hill's work has not influenced many younger poets, although in the work of such poets as John Burnside, David Constantine, Bernard O'Donoghue and Pauline Stainer, influenced also perhaps by Heaney's anthropological contexts in *North*, there is still a strain of contemporary poetry dedicated to drawing inspiration from nature and rural ways; at its best it finds a humanist center in relationships between man and nature, or else—when these fail—in Hardyesque ironies.

But in today's urban landscape, not everyone can find inspiration in rural mythologies, and many poets turn to the transformations of a suburban surrealism used to express alienation and disaffection that again, in its performance aspect, goes back to the 1960s. One thinks of Brian Patten's collection *Little Johnny's Confession* (1967) and poems such as Roger McGough's "Mother the Wardrobe is Full of Infantrymen":

> mother the wardrobe is full of infantrymen
> i did i asked them
> but they snarled saying it was a man's life

What is one to do with the domestic landscape? At the very least it can be interrogated for its human narratives. At the bottom of McGough's wardrobe is a small boy alienated from an adult world that rebuffs him. The comic potential of alienation was taken to an imaginative extreme some years ago by Craig Raine in the title poem to his collection *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home* (1979), where it is the alien who is alienated in the domestic landscape, trying to make sense of it. If the defamiliarization of some of the language is refreshingly surrealistic, there is also a knowing referentiality that detracts from an alien effort at taxonomic expression:

> Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings
> and some are treasured for their markings-

Even in this imaginative context, it is hard to see a book as a "Caxton," given that the famous printer neither invented books,

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nor even printing. If the poet and critic James Fenton coined the idea of a "Martian" school of poetry, this school never extended beyond Raine and Christopher Reid, who similarly attempted to portray a fresh look at reality using giant conceits and similes, such as a striped lawn being "the cat's pyjamas" ("A Whole School of Bourgeois Primitives"). However, they stimulated an interest in extending poetic language, and many of the more respected younger poets writing today draw on such defamiliarizing techniques, challenging analogies, technical, erudite and scientific terms, as shown in the work of Robert Crawford, Linda France, Lavinia Greenlaw, Michael Hofmann and Don Paterson, all of whom—among many others—delight in extending poetry's linguistic scope while still aiming for a popular audience. Crawford's "Scotland" is a case in point:

Semiconductor country, land crammed with intimate expanses,
Your cities are superlattices, heterojunctive
Graphed from the air, your cropmarked farmlands
Are epitaxies of tweed.

Expressed in threat and menace, alienation was a theme of early Auden, and picked up on today by Fenton in such poems as "A Staffordshire Murderer," "Nest of Vampires" and later work. It finds a voice again in Greenlaw's "The Shape of Things" where, after a sleepless night in a "deluded hotel" imagining all things behind the noises heard, she grasps the receiver on the alarm call to whisper "*thank you, thank you.*" If there is a self-mocking tone here, a hint of comedy to balance the menace, then Paterson's work shows it to a much greater degree, especially in a poem where as a young boy he and a friend take a train into the nearby city and find themselves terribly lost ("11.00: Baldovan").

If the self in the work of these poets is vaguely confessional, it is still related very much to a recognizably lyric "I." The most prevalent influence claimed by most younger poets is still that of the American confessional poets, but the voice is more related to the public venue of poetry readings. Like that of protest poetry, a projected persona takes over and lets rip in a loud or soft monologue, comic or serious. The most notable practitioners here being Simon Armitage, Carol Ann Duffy, Glyn Maxwell and Jo Shapcott, followed by the Pythonesque antics of many others,

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including Ian Duhig, Geoff Hattersley, Ian McMillan and a poet who also writes in Scots, W. N. Herbert. The demotic aspect of these poets has gained them popularity, but at the cost of generalizing experience which finds them ventriloquizing popular views in chameleon voices rather than suggesting them through the discipline of a truly Aristotelian imitation.

The selection of contemporary British poetry that follows is drawn from geographic diversity, if not from the full panorama of race, class and gender, but it exemplifies a perhaps humbler attempt at popularity and accessibility by addressing themes of our common humanity and allowing the reader the intelligence to respond in his or her own way to the poem's own intrinsic intelligence.

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GERRY CAMBRIDGE

Island Letter

to William Neill

From rain the sun this afternoon intensifies
Here to sudden brilliance, to surprise
This tablecloth checked red and white,
These scattered pens and papers, to delight
The mind with fresh untouched simplicity.
When I lean forward, look, down there I see
Papay's baby relative, the Holm,
Shine like an emerald in the bay, high foam
Making its slow uprise and silent fall
As usual on its east cliff, as curloos call
In the fast-cloud-shadowed field before
This pane.
But I should tell you more
Just now about the croft I'm in; Tom Mackay,
Needing help, lets me it for nothing, and I try
My hand at hay work in return; its floor
Is of stone flags, its walls whitewashed, the door
Paint-cracked and peeling. And from the startled gaze
The cobalt ocean leaps, as ships on their various ways
Enlarge and pass, or drop beyond that edge
That looks to us a clean sharp ledge,
But to them unfolds landfall and ports and faces,
The constant emotions, the different places.

People, not things, are precious here: down
The west shore gravel track is the crown
Of earthly endeavour, kirkyard that I love
Reading epitaphs in, being briefly above
The dead's omnipotent helplessness: Each name,
Harcus, Brett and Isbister, by the final fame

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Of time, eaten by lichen. That startles here,
Out in light and breeze, where the west's clear
Three thousand miles to Canada, and I stand,
A tiny head in space, bootsoles on the island,
On the long brief journey of the beating heart.
But what I meant to get to at the start
Was how the sense of the island islands, also,
Time; each human encounter you can see in the glow
Of transience, in the hardworking now.
The island makes that possible, somehow;
No wonder the marvel of *The Tempest* Shakespeare set
On an island; they have that quality, yet.

And doubly that applies to tattie-bringing Tom Mackay,
(*Nat Gad,* as he would say, to my reply
To his question, "*Then hoo groo thum?*"
An dis that mean you doan't waant sum?)
Who brings them, free, in a bucket slung
Over his tractor's exhaust pipe; and dung,
And hay, and all the island's smells
Intermingle when Tom strides in, and tells
Me in his finest deadpan style,
No gleam in his eyes, nor three-toothed smile,
Whey, there's nuthin thee day ti celebrate, man!
You're still an this small island, an'
Why you shood waant ti stay here I doan't know.
Bluddy hell, if I were yung, I'd go
Aff in a meenat! And he'll sit a while,
And twirl his thumbs in the croft's silence, smile
Occasionally at something I have said
And speak of his old grandparents, long since dead,
As if they still lived in this small croft, and he
Was a bairn again, not yet bound on the sea
That's the end of hope for his life, but still walked
Into this croft where they often talked
Of the island's daily happenings, magnified
To that significance Kavanagh knew, inside
The commonest occasions. His tatties are
Magnificent, dense and nutty, and though they're star-

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And rain- and soil-prompted, I agree
He *planted* them. He laughs with me.
Truculent, plain-speaking, one day he took an hour
To drive a mile, as the tractor kept on losing power;
You doan't seem too bathered by me trubble,
He announced from a mouth lost in stubble,
And we laughed in the island evening, calm
And vastly silent, the sound pewter-gleaming, balm
To the mind's red hours. Beyond Muir's myth,
Under the searing sun, I've helped Tom with
His hay work, sweated, drank home-brew, woke stiff,
Felt real beyond the decoyings of *if.*
He is a fine man and I like him greatly, won't
Bow to the promptings of the Brethren here, who don't
Do anything Tom would have, could he have had
As he would say, *suffeeshant appartunity.* It's sad,
Hearing them loudly in their Gospel Hall
Sing grim hymns of punishment when all
The airy island evening's bright,
And silver's dancing on the sea, and light
Pours from the sun's fierce coin; they stand,
Larkin's "death-suited," with, in hand,
The grim black tomes, in the evening after;
Who trade, for eternal dullness, time's wild laughter.
But I can bear no grudges; the Rendalls asked
Did I need extra blankets when I was tasked
On my arrival by nights of unseasonal cold;
Perhaps their belief is new, their actions old.
At Clestrain, Gowrie's nearest croft,
Live Stewart and Isabel Groat, Stewart soft-
Spoken, a silver-haired old man who sits each day
Beside an Atlantic window or who may,
Walking-sticked, attempt the field behind.
His placed words issue from a full mind,
You feel. And Isabel, who sits and drops
In silence's pool when the talk stops:
We didna notice your gas lamp last night,
And when the ripples halt I say, "That's right,"
But nothing more, and Stewart, gray-eyed, smiles

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As the late sun up in the placeless miles
Starts making a silver track on the sea through the pane
For the day's turned graceful now the early rain
Has stopped. What is a life spent only here
I think, far from the south's brutalities and fear,
White clucking sunlit chickens round the door,
Or days and nights of mist and the sea's roar
With the seals moaning from the east shore's skerry
To this old couple, who called me *Cherry*
In a Christmas card last year? I cannot say.

There is one shop, two churches, eighty folk here
Year-round, and tourists that with terns appear
Primarily in the long light; and one eight seat
Island plane that often tries to beat
Its record of under a minute from Westray
For the world's shortest flight, and every day
But Sunday, the mainland's ferry at the quay,
And events like Tom Mackay who stopped to tell me,
There's a package doon there fer yoo, and yoo owe
A canseederable sum fer its been lyin; "I'll go
Right now and get it; will it be much, d'you think?"
Oa, maybe as much as a pownd; in a blink
I'll tek you. And we go.
And, Willie, what
Real darkness can be like I had forgot
Till I came here, and walked by accident one night
Down some dirt-track that, with not even starlight,
I'd mistaken for the road. Or, approaching Gowrie,
To see it loom, star-perched, above me,
And to have to come inside and grope around
Among spoons and chairs and pens before I found
The lantern and the matches, send my shadow
Up the wall with the match's strike, before the glow
Of the lantern gave the room to me again—
Is to know more truly that the world of women and men
Is nothing to nature's ooriness, see that light
Is addition to the universal night,
Addition, and the night the root,

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The *primum mobile* and absolute,
Or so I say just now. So I've taken,
Not trusting to what mind's fancies could awaken,
To leaving the lamp and the matches just inside
The front door, and to leaving it and the inner wide
To the miles of sea-breathed dark till I've made sure
There's nothing within to meet me. Pure
Imagination some would say, and yet
Although no townlife-softened type, if I forget
To leave the lantern handy my nape-hairs
Uprise, lest I be taken unawares.

But now the sun is out and warms my hands;
And all around today throughout the islands
Islanders make hay and drink home-brew,
As I on finishing these light lines will do,
For here comes Tom Mackay to fetch me now;
Will I look back in years to come, imagine how
Happy I was this day, and think it all a dream?
On the cobalt waves the crests are white as cream,
And Tom's here, straws for tractor seat, and he
In a panic to get the bales in. The boundless sea
Surrounds us, Willie, and I'll step on
To the box on the back of the tractor and be gone
From this small trade of versing and its joys
With Tom and his huge hands and his tractor's noise
Through the sweltering island day for miles
To hay bales and home-brew and faces and their smiles.

Gowrie
Papa Westray
Orkney Islands

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TESSA ROSE CHESTER

The Dead Father

Last night I dreamed
you had your back to me.

You shaved.
Dressed, slowly.

Coughed.
Bent your way down stairs

clutching your tobacco pouch.
Looked out at the garden,

shaking your head
at the single grey rose.

Sat in your chair
with paper and pipe.

All with your back to me
and not a word.

*

I'm told you've been away:
not dead, then, after all.

You've been looked after, fed,
clothed. But any sudden shock

and you'll be gone.
For good, this time.

Your presence in the old home
gets my heart fast-forwarding.

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I want to cry
because you never look at me.

And fear of that second death
makes me spill your drink.

*

I've looked for you before:
in different rooms,

hidden places
round the house,

under the stairs,
out in the shed.

I always knew you were
probably in Mexico

at Popocatépetl
or the festival of a local saint;

maybe at the Pyramids,
or Ayres Rock, where

I'm sure we nearly met.
Or closer, in a small English town.

Closer still; sharing
rush-hour crowds,

you keeping out of sight,
one more petal

on that wet black bough.
And when "This Is Your Life"

has got through anyone
who is anyone;

when it's the turn
of ordinary folk like us,

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will they say
"and here is your father

whom you haven't seen for thirty years,
all the way from . . ."

And will you swan in,
dapper in a red bow-tie;

will you turn and face me.
And will you speak, then?

Gift

November 1943

The box was damp;
too light for its size.

As she removed the lid
a great cold came up

through her face
like freezing rain.

Snowdrops, violets.

Tight bunches lying
in shallow graves.

Snipped free
they tumbled down her arms

into her lap,
their supple spines

and lolling heads
drunk with scent

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that plunged into
the overheated room.

That night

she dreamed of trenches
in the snow,

waking to the sight of
purple, white and green

clumped in cups
and sugar bowls

around the flat,
settling fragrance

in sly corners
she had brushed aside

and now turned
to see again.

Where did he get them from
in winter, in the war?

You never knew;
but opening your Bible on a whim

I find half-a-dozen stalks,
cracked, misshapen rags
guttering a psalm.

And a card that just says
"Jim."

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MICHAEL DONAGHY

Black Ice and Rain

Psalms 6.6

Can I come in? I saw you slip away.
Hors d'oeuvres depress you, don't they? They do me.
And cocktails, jokes . . . such dutiful abandon.
Where the faithful observe immovable feasts
—boat races, birthdays, marriages, martyrdoms—
we're summoned to our lonely ceremonies anytime:
B minor, the mouldiness of an old encyclopædia,
the tinny sun snapping off the playground swings,
these are, though we can't know this, scheduled
to arrive that minute of the hour, hour of the day,
day of every year. Again, regular as brickwork,
comes the time the nurse jots on your chart
before she pulls the sheet across your face. Just so,
the past falls open anywhere—even sitting here with you.

Sorry. You remind me of a girl I knew.
I met her at a party much like this, but louder, younger,
the bass so fat, the night so sticky you could drown.
We shouted art at each other over soul
and cold beer in the crowded kitchen and I, at least,
was halfway to a kiss when she slipped
her arm around her friend.
I worked at liking him, and it took work,
and it never got any easier being harmless,
but we danced that night like a 3 way game of chess
and sang to Curtis Mayfield pumped so loud
that when I drove them home they could hardly
whisper to invite me up.

Their black walls smirked with Jesus on black velvet
—Jesus, Elvis, Mexican skeletons, big eyed Virgins,

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Rodin's hands clasped in chocolate prayer—
an attitude of decor, not like this room of yours.
A bottle opened—tequila with a cringe of worm—
and she watched me.
Lighting a meltdown of Paschal candles,
she watched me. He poured the drinks rasping
We're seriously into cultural detritus. At which, at last,
she smiled. Ice cubes cracked. The worm sank in my glass.
And all that long year we were joined at the hip.

I never heard them laugh. They had,
instead, this tic of scratching quotes in air—
like frightened mimes inside their box of style,
that first class carriage from whose bright window
I watched the suburbs of my life recede.
Exactly one year on she let me kiss her—once—
her mouth wine-chilled, my tongue a clumsy guest,
and after that the invitations dwindled.
By Christmas we were strangers. It was chance
I heard about the crash. He died at once.
Black ice and rain, they said. No news of her.
I can't remember why I didn't write.
Perhaps I thought she'd sold the flat and left.

Some nights midway to sleep I'm six years old.
Downstairs it's New Year's Eve. Drink and shrieks.
But my mother's lit the luminous plastic Jesus
to watch me through the night which is why
I've got my pillow wrapped around my head.
I never hear the door. And when she speaks,
her thick-tongued anger rearing like a beast,
I feel my hot piss spreading through the sheets.
But when I wake, grown up, it's only sweat.
But if I dream, I bleed. A briar crown,
a fist prized open wide, a steadied nail,
a hammer swinging down—the past falls open
anywhere . . .
Ash Wednesday evening.
Driving by, I saw her lights were on.

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I noticed both their names still on the buzzer
and when I rang I heard her voice. *Come in*—
her nose was broken, her front teeth gone,
a rosary was twisted round her fists—
—*Come in. I've been saying a novena.*
Inside, each crucifix and candle shone
transfigured in her chrysalis of grief.
She spoke about the crash, how she'd been driving,
how they had to cut her from the wreck . . .
and then she slipped and called me by his name.

Of those next hours I remember most
the silences between her sobs, the rain
against the skylight slowly weakening
to silence, silence brimming into sleep and dawn.
Then, having lain at last all night beside her,
having searched at last that black walled room,
the last unopened chamber of my heart,
and found there neither pity nor desire
but a collection of religious kitsch,
I inched my arm from under her and left.

Since then, the calmest voice contains her cry
just within the range of human hearing
and where I've hoped to hear my name gasped out
from cradle, love bed, death bed, there instead
I catch her voice, her broken lisp, his name.
Since then, each night contains all others,
nested mirror-within-mirror, stretching back from then
to here and now, this party, this room, this bed,
where, in another life, we might have kissed.
Thank you, friend, for showing me your things
you have exquisite taste—but let's rejoin your guests
who must by now be wondering where you've gone.

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Irena of Alexandria

Creator, thank You for humbling me.
Creator, who twice empowered me to change
a jackal to a saucer of milk,
a cloud of gnats into a chandelier,
and once, before the emperor's astrologers,
a nice distinction into an accordion,
and back again, thank You
for choosing Irena to eclipse me.

She changed a loaf of bread into a loaf of bread,
caused a river to flow downstream,
left the leper to limp home grinning and leprous,
because, the bishops say, Your will burns
bright about her as a flame about a wick.

Thank You, Creator, for taking the crowds away.
Not even the blind come here now.
I have one bowl, a stream too cold to squat in,
and the patience of a saint. Peace be,
in the meantime, upon her. And youth.
May sparrows continue to litter her shoulders,
children carpet her footsteps in lavender,
and may her martyrdom be beautiful and slow.

Refusals

Shooting their horses and setting their houses alight,
The faithful struck out for a hillside in Sussex
To wait for the prophesied rapture to take them
At midnight, New Year's Eve, 1894.

But they knelt in the slow drifting snow singing hymns,
Hushing their children and watching the stars,

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Until the sky brightened and the cold sun rose white
Over the plain where their houses still smouldered.

Some froze there all day, some straggled back sobbing
To salvage what little remained of their lives.
Others went mad and refused, 'til the end of their days
To believe that the world was still there.

Here, ten seconds to midnight, they join in the count
Over tin horns squealing in the bright drunk rooms.

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SOPHIE HANNAH

Long for This World

I settle for less than snow,
try to go gracefully as seasons go

which will regain their ground—
ditch, hill and field—when a new year comes round.

Now I know everything:
how winter leaves without resenting spring,

lives in a safe time frame,
gives up so much but knows he can reclaim

all titles that are his,
fall out for months and still be what he is.

I settle for less than snow—
high only once, then no way up from low,

then to be swept from drives.
Ten words I throw into your changing lives

fly like ten snowballs hurled:
I hope to be, and will, long for this world.

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STUART HENSON

Nocturne

That summer he was mostly out of work.
The heat wave struck the city in the last week

of June. By day you felt the beads of sweat
slip down your skin and dry. At night the sweet

smell of garbage from the sidewalk would drift
in at his window on the hot up-draught

that seemed to blow directly from a vent
and mingle odours from the restaurant

below. Across the street a neon sign
pulsed with its simple imagery of sin.

Sometimes he sold cocaine to pay the rent.
Sometimes he'd simply lie and smoke a joint

and wonder how his life had come to this:
a room, a bed, his laundry in a suitcase.

And as he lay he'd listen to the trains—
like whales blasting lonely one-note tunes

across the downtown lots and box-car lines.
Then something ancient stirred within his loins

as if he shared their grief and felt the pain
of huge ungodly lovers as they pined

each for the other through the fetid night.
And all the garnered sorrow of those notes

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ached as the slow beat of axles clattered past
the shells of factories where old men pissed

against the walls and the addicts curled
themselves into the shadows as a child

does to sleep and to escape disgust,
their faces empty, round and white as ghosts.

Up There

at ten thousand feet
you run for half a football pitch's length
and, breathless, you realise the body's just
a machine for living in.
You're nearer, there, to the spinning firmament
and the air's pure
but mean with its oxygen.

At night you lie down
and the bone of the mountain's uncomfortably
close to your own, the sky's membrane
is pricked through with stars,
and the roof of your tent
where the seeds fall, steadily, like rain,
is uncomfortably thin.

When you wake
and the moon has risen above the peaks
in a moment of disbelief you believe
that you're lying in snow,
that you froze; the machine stopped; that
your soul is about to take
a step into heaven—or oblivion.

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PETER McDONALD

The Mild Autumn

I'm back, and the mild autumn is here too,
where by this time in October usually
the trees are stripped down, and a flooding wind
has come with sleet and cold, to stay for good.

But this year we are having a mild autumn,
and I am home to see you in October
when every day the sun keeps flooding
into these rooms where, for a while, I'll stay

and where, for a while, we have each other back,
so that today I needn't watch my time
as we wait, not saying much, and half shut down,
for the pools results or the next meal to come.

With the winter holding back for good, we both
suppose that this might usually be the way,
that the winds will keep down, and the cold
evenings and days will not come, after all,

suppose I may stay here, or might never have gone,
where the trees with all their leaves in flood
are never stripped, and where the night comes down
without a breath of cold when it comes to stay.

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The Watercolourists

It is six in the evening in the nineteenth century,
and I join the watercolourists on the Aventine
who are all sitting forwards in one straggly line
completely intent, and never noticing me,
as they work and watch, quickly, silently,
to catch the sky in a violet bruise or a stain
that creeps into their paper, almost weighing it down,
the distant and near colours all that they can see.

Rome is below us, where sheep still haunt the Forum,
and I know I am with the busy dead, for here
is my own great-grandfather, John Graham,
who studies the view, and paints one field in Ayrshire
for ever, utterly engrossed; in a flutter and flare
of light and water, I start work with the least of them.

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GEORGE SZIRTES

Prayer for My Daughter

1

So here we are and here's my stanza,
like a Clementi cadenza
a penny-plain extravaganza,

just to keep things neat but sprightly
in what might otherwise politely
decline into a straight unsightly

father-to-daughter patronising
advisory misadvising
lecture on vague points arising,

a Yeatsian prayer to admonish
characteristics too Maud Gonneish,
Fenian or Amazonish.

2

My stanza's nineteenth century capers
are out of time. I read the papers
and know the new opinion shapers,

I know their loose, sincere demotic
ironies and semiotic
quiddities, but I'm Quixotic:

though windmills are as quaint as giants,
I continue in defiance
of gravity or modern science

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rhyming like a man demented
dolphin torn and gong tormented
till the giants have relented.

3

Darling, tonight the whole horizon
closed like a lid. The traffic sighs on
rainy tarmac, men flit like flies on

jets of wind, the river fractures,
and a streetlight manufactures
a wealth of frazzled broken textures.

So beautiful: the petrol station's
amber flatness, the quotations
of lit shopfronts, the impatience

of running clouds. The winter races
into darkness, interlaces
bodies in its breathing spaces.

4

You see, I want to turn this patter-
song to deeper, graver matter,
more throttle more carburetor.

I want to be a souped up, solemn,
portentous father, wise as Solom-
on not just a gossip column,

someone you'll take seriously,
whose works you'll study furiously
not discard imperiously

from some theory-laden high-rise
nor swat and squash flat, wasp- or fly-wise.
but approve, applaud and lionise.

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5

Walking last night I sought an image
to offer you, a kind of homage
to the wind's wild scrape and scrimmage,

and noticed how the very cheapest
vulgarisms struck the deepest:
the Woolworth lights, a buckled leaf pressed

to the pavement, a crisp packet
flying in the gust. I took it
home with me, to store and stack it

in memory, imagination,
to use it in some combination:
a poem finding its occasion.

6

Some quick advice? Well just a quickie:
Beware the sentimental-sticky,
Beware the choosy and the picky,

Beware all those who talk in torrents
The snobs who earned the strict abhorrence
Of poor pale sickly D.H. Lawrence,

Beware the Oxfordly superior,
Beware those with a smooth exterior,
The cynic wiser and world-wearier,

Beware the shady and the murky,
Beware the overprecious-quirky,
Beware your father talking turkey.

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7

Out on your own. The eighteenth hurdle
safely past. The tales I've heard all
tend to make a man's blood curdle,

so to the prayer (I'm feeling prayerful):
Darling be wise, be good, be careful,
be water, fire and earth and air-ful,

find images beyond the kitchen
that women used to bake and bitch in
from Halicarnassus to plain Hitchin,

may you, in darkness, be that changing
wind and light, your mind free-ranging,
sea-like, unplumbed, salt, estranging,

tender, yes, but not kid-gloving
neither too mousy, nor too shoving,
be fortunate, be loved, be loving

be all of these, be kind, far-seeing,
in short, beyond the you- and me-ing
all that befits a human being,

what human beings may be made for:
life, unearned, unknown, unpaid for,
that you were celebrated, prayed for.

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Cromer Green at the Regency Café

I used to wonder at the old ones sitting
in cars parked neatly opposite the sea
with Sunday papers in their laps, steadily
dozing near uneventful water, knitting
in silence, reading, waiting. What was the sense
of congregating here with weathered faces
beside these terminal railings in places
that signalled departure and indifference?
The sadness of the English, I thought. Odd
how they folded in on themselves at last,
something serious must have happened here
under the jurisdiction of this grey-green god
they weren't exactly worshipping, but cast
respectful glances at across the pier.

Out on the pier a three-legged dog beamed
happily at its master. Water fribbled and scrabbled
below the walkway, laughing at some ribald
double-entendre. Someone must have dreamed
all this at a time of comic anxiety.
Fishermen were casting their last lines.
Great towering hotels flashed gleeful signs.
The moon rose over the building society.
Boys were trying to surf into the stones
along the beach. Someone had thrown away
a paper bag which was carried by a gust
past cartons and upended ice-cream cones.
There were cups of tea at the Regency Café
and cod and chips on tables covered in dust.

There was nothing to say about this. It was
saying itself in the language of self-delight,
beautiful and formed, talking in spite
of us through its own generated grammars
in a kind of English no one actually spoke,
leaving behind a faint linguistic trace
like a historical essence, a lost grace

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that no one act of history could revoke.
Now the wind was rising. Waves were barred
with patches of pure colour, each a shimmer
in the coming dusk with echoes of dying sound,
but clearly defined, the image sharp and hard.
A brilliant half rainbow was growing dimmer,
retreating to its source beneath the ground.

I could imagine being one of the old,
staying here for ever, staring past
the lit pier and searching the overcast
sky for the moon in the growing cold.
Nature was peopled with coherent signs
that anyone could read. The waitress brought
the bill and we stood up. It was a short
journey home and we should start it . . . Lines
of lightbulbs were gently swaying outside
and the wind was fresh from the north. Our car
waited, parked with all the rest in the drive
by the sunken gardens. Another seagull cried
below us. Lights were glowing in the bar
of The Ship and the old were still alive.

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ADAM THORPE

Discipline

The old man shows me the flat of his hand:
"Still there," he says, "kept us on th'ball."
He was talking of my grandfather's tannings
with a yard ruler in the village school.

"No nancyin', see. A very fair man,
your gramp." I grin. How am I to answer
now that ruler and the strap are banned
along with terms like—well, "Nancy"?

I gaze down squarely at a drain and nod.
What I'd like to do really is apologise—
my own blood having swung the rod
to hurt the child this man was, chastised

unfairly (a task not done, some slight
blurring of the line?)—but of course I don't.
This particular Nancy is too polite
and to rebuke the locals is to be disowned

from the frail family line. We chat
about the weather, then walk on
down Main Street—him this way, me that,
each as different as cheese from chalk

and yet what makes my cowardly look
more despicable still is a certain pride.
I'm taking the road my grandfather took.
In old man's hands his marks abide.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Shakespeare's Globe

THE RESTORED GLOBE THEATRE IN LONDON MAY BE TOO BIG. It may be historically inaccurate, or it may be *too* accurate, for critics who like their Shakespeare modernized at all costs. It may be touristy, a Disneyland for grownups. It may be hot on sunny afternoons, wet on rainy ones, and dreadfully uncomfortable. (You have a choice between standing for three hours in the yard, or sitting Elizabethan style in one of the galleries on backless, armless, hard wooden benches.) It is nonetheless the most exciting new kind of theatrical space to be constructed in my lifetime. It not only teaches us about Shakespeare with every production, it teaches us about theatre generally.

Nor can there be any doubt of its success with audiences. The Globe has been averaging over ninety-percent capacity, despite being the largest theatre in London for non-musicals. It currently holds 1600, up from 1500 last year after special pleading with the fire marshals. (The yard could still easily hold more.) Naysayers continue to deride the Globe as a tourist attraction, but most significant theatres throughout history have attracted tourists, going back to the Theatre of Dionysus in ancient Athens, the most cosmopolitan city of its day. Foreigners in Shakespeare's day flocked to the London theatres; their diaries and letters describing theatrical glories are important historical documents, better than anything we have from the English themselves.

For that matter, statistics show that today in the summertime twenty-five percent of *all* London theatre audiences are made up of foreigners. And are those foreigners a bored, tired, if-this-is-Tuesday-it-must-be-*Hamlet* crowd? On the contrary, they tend to be eager, knowledgeable, and very responsive. Actors at the Globe say they love playing to its audiences. "My God, they're well read!" exclaimed an actor during a discussion period after a performance. They pick up on every nuance, interacting vigorously but good-naturedly with the performers.

Indeed, by-play with the audience (who are actually better lit than the actors, since the stage is shaded) is one of the most exciting elements to come out of this amazing theatrical experiment. Theatre history texts always used to make much of the liveliness of Elizabethan audiences. There was so much stress on their eating, drinking, flirting, and brawling that you began to wonder if anyone took notice of the play. Because in modern theatres we are expected to sit quietly in the dark, interrupting the action only occasionally with decorous laughter or applause, we assume that a boisterous audience must have been a distraction. A better comparison would be with modern sports events,

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where the spectators eat, drink, smoke, walk around, talk, and scream, yet are riveted on the action. Similarly, in a large, open-air amphitheatre packed with an audience fully visible to the actors and to one another, a festive atmosphere need not detract from the drama, but can actually intensify it.

Mark Rylance, Artistic Director of the Globe, has gradually increased the challenges to the company, sticking to comedies and histories in the first two years. This past season, his third, he chose two of Shakespeare's Roman tragedies, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra,* along with *The Comedy of Errors* and a commissioned new play, *Augustine's Oak.* The major tragedies remain untouched, perhaps awaiting a charismatic star capable of handling them. Thus far, actors have been mostly talented, well-trained, young unknowns, including a fair number of Americans, who have acquitted themselves well. The late Sam Wanamaker, founder and guiding spirit of the Globe restoration, was American, with the result that the Globe project has been international from the beginning.

he best new idea Rylance had this past season was to have two directors for each production, Master of Play and Master of Verse, the former in charge of staging, the latter of speech. As a result, the company was extremely well spoken, vocally the best Shakespeare company in the world, clear, vigorous, melodious, and well balanced, despite including actors from Ireland, Canada, the United States, Kenya, Italy, Hong Kong, and Spain, in addition to Great Britain. In earlier Globe productions, actors tended to overproject, partly because of bad acoustics, partly because of the awesome surroundings. Acoustics have improved each year, for several reasons. Although still open to the skies, the space now has fully enclosing walls that block out most noise, except for the occasional helicopter. The wooden stage background has become ever more elaborate, its balconies, balusters, and columns reflecting and resonating sound. Finally, a full audience improves the acoustics of any theatre, and the Globe, as noted, has been packing them in. Furthermore, the outstanding Masters of Voice (Tim Carroll and Giles Block) have taught the actors how to speak properly; vocal projection in the theatre is a matter of resonance, enunciation, and proper emphasis, not of shouting. For example, Mark Lewis Jones, playing Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar,* actually delivered the "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" speech in a conversational tone, yet he was fully audible to the entire house. Instead of being intimidated by the historic location, actors have learned to let it support them.

Unfortunately, the staging at the Globe is not yet up to the level of the speech. Habits learned in a naturalistic theatre die hard. Globe actors tend to be far too busy, running and thrashing about as if their directors were seeking credit for covering every last square foot of the stage. Groupings and lines of movement appear to be random. Mark Rylance, for example, staged *Julius Caesar* in a laissez-faire manner. Caesar's ghost meandered through his scene in a way that completely destroyed any menace or authority, although the actor (Paul Shelley) is tall, striking, and well spoken. Similarly, the confrontation between opposing armies in Act IV should obviously have the two groups at opposite sides of the

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stage, but Rylance had them wandering all over, mingling with one another. Anyone viewing a still photograph of the scene would have had no idea of who was who, or what was supposedly going on. During the discussion period, Mark Lewis Jones approvingly described Rylance's staging as "organic," a buzzword that basically means the actors go wherever they please. The problem, however, is that what pleases a modern actor would not have been pleasing to an Elizabethan actor, nor to the audience of an Elizabethan play. The big set speeches like "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" that define most Shakespearean roles require the actor literally to take a stand, to select and hold a position so as to become the audience's focal point. Wandering around the stage destroys focus, while stillness is like a close-up in a film, drawing us in, to the exclusion of all else.

Despite my reservations, however, *Caesar* was actually an effective production, with good performances from its all-male cast. Richard Bremmer was the best Cassius I have ever seen. Pale, thin, and bony, he had "a lean and hungry look" indeed, while his perfect speech turned out to be the key to the character, as he delivered the rancorous lines like a predator biting into flesh. The rest of the principals in the cast included Danny Sapani, a strong, beautifully spoken black actor playing Brutus; Paul Shelley, effective as Caesar when not undermined by the staging; and Toby Cockerell, brilliant as both Portia and Octavius. Cockerell, who played Princess Katherine in *Henry V* at the Globe two years earlier, provides a window on how Elizabethan males might have played women, feminine without being effeminate. Portia is a strong woman, who cannot be fey or coquettish. Cockerell attacked the role straightforwardly, with none of the misgivings you might expect from a modern actor afraid of being categorized as gay, providing a forceful, balanced portrait.

I found Mark Lewis Jones too understated as Mark Antony; he spoke "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" well (and there is little more to the role besides that speech), but did not play the given circumstance of danger. When Antony begins, the crowd, who have just heard Brutus justify the assassination, despise Caesar; they are thus suspicious of Antony, who has actually been forbidden to praise the assassinated dictator. If Antony fails to win them over, the crowd may kill him; yet if he antagonizes the assassins, they may kill him themselves. Jones played the speech as if delivering a legal brief, in a dry, logical manner, as if it did not affect him personally, but it is written to appeal to the emotions, using all the rhetorical tricks that Shakespeare learned in school. When Jones got to the reading of Caesar's will, however, he at last caught fire, finishing out effectively.

The Comedy of Errors, with Kathryn Hunter as Master of Play, was a better production than *Caesar*. It is easier for a modern company to perform, however, and for a modern audience to enjoy. Shakespeare's shortest play and most tightly plotted comedy by far, *Errors* has hilarious situations and endless opportunities for comic by-play. Vincenzo Nicoli played both Antipholuses, while Marcello Magni did the Dromios. The

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former is British, despite his Italian name, a tall, dark-haired actor with a broken nose (he resembles pictures of Michelangelo) that gave him a quizzical, eccentric look. Magni is genuinely Italian, a lively Harpo Marx look-alike. The two worked together like a great comic team, a reminder that Elizabethan actors like Will Kemp and Robert Armin were the equivalent of modern comedians like W. C. Fields or Bob Hope, famous over and above their work in plays. Here, the slapstick, the comic chases (which had Magni shinnying up one of the stage columns), and above all the by-play with the audience, were boisterously entertaining. There was much ad-libbed improvisation, plus unscripted comic business like revolving door tricks, a duel using chickens for swords, and a badminton game using dinner plates for rackets.

Oddly, the comics did not change costumes when changing roles. Usually, if you have two actors playing a pair of twins, you dress them the same, to stress their supposed resemblance; if a single actor plays both roles, as here, you give him two contrasting costumes, so that the audience can tell the characters apart. Hunter dressed both pairs of twins the same, yet you never lost track of who was who.

Augustine's Oak, the first new play to be performed by the Globe company, is a thin piece of work. Written by Peter Oswald, it concerns not the church father of confessional fame, but the early Christian missionary chronicled by Bede. There had been plenty of Christians in England in Roman times, but after the withdrawal of the Romans and arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, paganism was again the dominant religion. In A.D. 597, Pope Gregory sent Augustine to convert King Ethelbert of Kent, and hence his subjects. There are thus ample opportunities for conflict in the play, not only between Augustine and the pagan priests, but also between Ethelbert and his wife, already a Christian. Oswald, however, displayed a flair for the undramatic, with the conflicts going nowhere. A key scene has Augustine preaching to the king with the pagan priests in attendance. Instead of providing a pitched debate, the play has Ethelbert listen to the sermon, then wander off to think it over. There is endless exposition in the play, much of it in lifeless verse. The production's only strength was not in its script, but in the staging by Tim Carroll, Master of both Play and Verse, which included stunning pagan rituals, with masks, effigies, and flaming vessels. It is laudable that the company would do new plays, but they ought to be able to find better ones. Verse plus English history are not enough in themselves to compete with Shakespeare, who was not just a lyrical poet but a great dramatizer as well.

Antony and Cleopatra, with Giles Block as Master of Play, was another all-male production, starring Mark Rylance as Cleopatra. Critics generally praised his performance, but the audience seemed less impressed, giggling at his entrance in a gaudy Elizabethan frock. Yes, Rylance was convincing as a woman, but he was not a very attractive or erotic one. No one knows who played which roles in Shakespeare originally, but historians believe that boys played ingénues like Juliet or Ophelia, while men played older women like Gertrude in *Hamlet* or the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. Cleopatra is not young, but if she is not sexually alluring, there

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is no play. There were other, more attractive female role-players in the cast, including Toby Cockerell as Octavia, and James Gillan as Iras. (If Paul Shelley, as Antony, had any sense, he would have made a play for Iras instead of her dowdy mistress.) Besides, Cleopatra's famous line "I shall see some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness" was obviously a witty self-reference to the boy playing the role. In the end, this production seemed more gimmick than drama, especially when so many great actresses have played Rylance's role. His performance reminded me of Samuel Johnson's remarks about lady preachers—not well done, but then you were surprised to see it done at all.

The most interesting and informative production last summer at the Globe was not by the regular company, but by a visiting troupe performing a Kathakali version of *King Lear*. Kathakali is a form of dance-drama dating from the seventeenth century that dramatizes stories drawn mostly from the Indian epics. Costumes and makeup, which take hours to put on, are incredibly colorful and fantastical. Dance involves the performers' entire bodies, using facial and bodily expressions, including hand gestures, in an elaborate code. (There are about six hundred hand gestures, for example.) Two singers, who stand behind the actors, chant the text of the play, accompanied by mainly percussive music.

Playing Lear with a bright green and red face and a gilded headdress a yard high would not have appealed to Richard Burbage. Elizabethan acting, whatever it was like, could not have looked anything like Kathakali, yet it shared with the Indian form an essential formality. Elizabethan texts on rhetoric, for example, depict an elaborate set of hand gestures that are reminiscent of the ones used in Kathakali, though of course the meanings were different. Elizabethan actors spoke their own lines, and did not dance except as part of the action, but music appears in every Shakespearean play. Elizabethan costumes and makeup were more realistic than in Kathakali, but we do know that the Elizabethans sometimes used masks, while financial records show that their costumes could be expensively gorgeous. Furthermore, the Elizabethan stage, a wooden platform backed by a façade, is similar to the Kathakali stage. Both could be set anywhere, but the ornate stage background of the Globe recalls the Indian temples in front of which Kathakali is most frequently performed.

The Leday/Keli Company presented their Indian *King Lear* in an adaptation by David McRuvie, under his and Annette Leday's direction. *Lear* was chosen because of its simple, fairy-tale plot, like that of all classical Indian theatre. All the characters except the Fool correspond to standard Kathakali character types. Lear, for example, is a *Katti*, a royal character defined by pride and anger; his green and red face symbolizes royalty and violence. Kalamandalam Padmanabhan Nair played Lear, while Annette Leday herself (a Frenchwoman who has studied and performed extensively in India) played Cordelia. The play was greatly simplified, using only nine actors plus two singers, with the Gloucester plot cut entirely, yet even though the songs were sung in the Malayalam language, the show was recognizably, even forcefully, *King Lear*.

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Kathakali is the most dramatic form of dance in the world; bodily and facial expressions are intensely emotional, with even the eye movements being choreographed. When Lear held the dead Cordelia in his arms at the end of the play, the moment was as poignant as I have ever seen it, although both actors were so covered in gilt, jewels, headdresses, robes, and thick makeup as to resemble porcelain dolls.

The staging of the piece was simple yet illuminating. Although a Kathakali stage is a thrust, so that the audience can watch from three sides, the actors always orient themselves frontally. The only unquestionable picture we have of the interior of an Elizabethan theatre, Johannes de Witt's 1596 sketch of the Swan Theatre, shows three actors similarly playing front, even though there appear to be some audience behind and above them. The modern Western obsession with having a performance be fully visible to an entire audience is probably the result of movies and television, where the camera gives everybody a front and center seat. In live performance, some audience members are always more equal than others; in sports events and religious ceremonies, as in traditional theatres, this blunt fact is simply taken for granted.

Needless to say, the Kathakali performers did not move around a lot. This does not mean that they were immobile, only that they tended to remain in place. At one point, for example, Sadanam Manikandan, playing the King of France (a beefed-up character in McRuvie's adaptation) did a vigorous war dance that drew great applause, but he always stayed in one spot, never wandering about. All the acting had this same vigorous, straightforward, presentational quality, like a stand-up comic doing a turn.

A successful Shakespearean production does not have to be done as Kathakali, or in some concocted, equivalent formalism. Indeed, one of the many marks of Shakespeare's genius is the way that his plays can be done in endless styles, even including Hollywood films. But we can learn a lot about Elizabethan theatre from traditional, non-realistic theatrical forms like Kathakali. Like Shakespeare, Kathakali does not present us with a slice of life, an illusion of actual behavior, but instead sets forth wonderful characters, and tells their story.

Noël Coward is one of those authors who are hard to place. He was clearly more than a hack, yet never achieved greatness. His best plays—*Private Lives*, *Blithe Spirit*, *Present Laughter*—are frequently revived, but have a loose, slapdash quality. Some scenes are brilliant, but others you would like to put on fast-forward. Coward, knocking out his plays in a few days and rarely revising, never even tried to achieve the exquisite construction of Molière, Wilde, or Feydeau. (Coward actually adapted Feydeau's *Occupe-toi d'Amélie*, into the much weaker *Look After Lulu*.)

Nor is Coward in the top rank of popular songwriters. Some of the ballads are truly beautiful, especially "Someday I'll Find You" and "I'll See You Again," while the novelty songs are riotously funny, like "Mad Dogs and Englishmen" (wonderful title!) or "Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage, Mrs. Worthington." But he was no Porter or Gershwin or

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Rodgers, as evidenced by the fact that the great pop singers, from his day to ours, have ignored his songs. Only Coward himself, or those imitating his style, could do them.

The plays have the same resistance to interpretation. Rex Harrison, for example, avoided doing Coward because "you ended up sounding just like him."[1] One of the marks of great drama is that it is open to a wide range of staging concepts. Revivals of Coward's plays, however, usually recapitulate the original productions. Often there is an actor with slicked-back hair and cigarette holder, to simulate Coward himself. Last year, however, in celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Coward's birth, there were two major revivals of Coward plays in London that tried to escape mere imitation, challenging the assumption that you have to "end up sounding just like him." The results were mixed. There may be more to Coward than meets the eye, but there is less than meets the eyes of Coward enthusiasts.

Philip Franks's production of *Private Lives* at the Royal National Theatre tried to turn the play into psychological melodrama, Strindberg with music and jokes. Pushing the emotional subtext at the expense of the comic text, he cast two RADA-trained classical actors in the lead roles. Juliet Stevenson, known in the United States almost solely for her performance in the cult film *Truly Madly Deeply*, has had a distinguished career on the London stage playing heavy stuff, lead roles in *Hedda Gabler, Yerma, The Duchess of Malfi, Les Liaisons Dangereuses, Death and the Maiden.* Tall and rather gawky looking, she nonetheless moves fluidly, and, like all great actors, has expressive eyes. She also has an equally potent smile, alternately winning or wicked, both expressions serving her well here. She thus managed successfully to bring out Amanda's charm, sexuality, and humor.

Her co-star Anton Lesser, however, lived down to his name. His theatrical credits are less impressive than Stevenson's, but are extensive and wide-ranging. Nevertheless, he was too short (shorter than his co-star), too peevish, and too ordinary to play Elyot. He affected a casual, naturalistic delivery of the lines that just did not work for this, Coward's own role. You cannot throw away lines like "Very big, China," without Coward's special emphasis. (Philip Hoare's recent biography suggests that Coward's odd way of punching dialog was the result of his growing up with a mother who was partially deaf.) I am afraid that Rex Harrison was right; you do have to speak Coward's lines in the Coward manner.

As long ago as 1956, Coward's fellow playwright Terence Rattigan noted that the play's equation of love and hatred was a profound insight. This is true, but nonetheless, the play is still a comedy of manners, not a psychological case study. Franks had his two leads play the sexuality of the characters very bluntly, almost panting and slobbering, while raising the violence to a brutal level. If the production had run in the United States, Jesse Helms would have tried to ban it.

[1] Philip Hoare, *Noël Coward: A Biography* (London, 1997), p. 476.

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I had no objection to the sex; clearly, Amanda and Elyot are mad for each other. Besides, Stevenson is an extremely attractive woman. (What she saw in Lesser escaped me.) The violence, however, went beyond the naturalistic to the ridiculous. In the famous fight scene at the end of Act II, Coward calls for five escalating physical encounters, starting with Amanda breaking a phonograph record over Elyot's head, and ending with their rolling on the floor "in paroxysms of rage." In Franks's staging, however, there were a good dozen encounters, all equally maniacal. Crockery flew; furniture rolled, slid, and broke; blows had enough intensity to cause instant death. This was not rage, but sadism. As in a Hollywood action-adventure movie, the violence had no shape, no build, just endless commotion for its own sake. By the end, I had long since lost interest in these two lunatics.

A better production, though of a weaker play, was Declan Donnellan's version of *Hay Fever*. Donnellan, founder of the prestigious Cheek by Jowl Theatre Company, and former Associate Director of the Royal National Theatre, rarely directs light comedy, but he found the right touch here. Coward tossed off the play in 1924 in three days. It was inspired by his visits to the home of the great but eccentric (and alcoholic) American actress Laurette Taylor, and her playwright husband. In *Hay Fever*, each member of the actress's family invites a guest for the weekend without telling the others. After suffering the family's bad manners, including some outlandish game playing, the humiliated, angry guests depart.

Donnellan framed the play with scenes from a Gothic melodrama that the actress, named Judith Bliss, is supposedly starring in. (In actuality, Taylor specialized in sentimental comedies penned by her husband. Coward makes her into a more serious but more shallow actress, while turning the husband into a novelist.) Characters moved in and out of this play-within-the-play, underlining the theatricalism that pervades the lives of the Bliss family, in their profession, their pastimes, and the way they present themselves to the world. The device also gave some shape to a play that is otherwise shapeless, a loose collection of scenes that simply come to a stop when the characters, as usual for Coward, run away. Escape, rather than resolution, is Coward's way of ending a play.

Nick Ormerod provided good sets and outstanding costumes for the play, including a cubist dress that captured the period in all its arty excesses. The cast was strong, especially the great Geraldine McEwan, a gravel-voiced pixie who has previously won awards for exuberant comic roles like Mrs. Malaprop in *The Rivals* and Lady Wishfort in *The Way of the World*. McEwan can make silly, histrionic, middle-aged women like them and Judith Bliss seem not only funny but sexy. McEwan dominates the stage, combining a deadpan delivery with an effervescent physicality. Literally flinging herself at the handsome male lead in *Hay Fever*, she landed on the sofa, rolled over it, and ended on the floor—all without spilling her drink. She is the Charlie Chaplin of comediennes.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

The Portraits of Ingres

"PORTRAITS BY INGRES: IMAGE OF AN EPOCH" at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., seen on the heels of the John Singer Sargent and Mary Cassatt exhibitions at the same museum, led to the inevitable comparisons, the inevitable questions. If all three artists are painters of exceptional talent (albeit in very dissimilar styles), why is the experience of their depth and value—of their profundity, if that word still flies in 2000—so different? Expert craft is never the whole story. John Singer Sargent was second to none in his ability to achieve the painterly effects he wanted, and surely his skills at Impressionist portraiture are the equivalent of Ingres's at realist portraiture. And, of course, their subjects are the same pampered souls. But why, in the end, does Ingres never feel as stiff, craft-obsessed, dry, or artificial as Sargent? Why does he invite repeated viewings in a way that Cassatt seldom does? "You can only paint what you are," an artist friend of mine once remarked about a colleague attempting to shift from naturalistic to abstract landscapes. Too often, Sargent and Cassatt treat the surface of life, shy away from revelation, obsession, quirkiness, or psychological insight. Even when he didn't want to, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), who ironically aspired to be a great history painter rather than a "mere" portraitist, explored depths the others could not plumb. "Cursed portraits" he may have called them ("they always keep me from undertaking important things"), but they are the source of his claim on our attention today.

The Ingres show, the first outside France devoted exclusively to the portraits, allowed us to study an artist who was more than a storybook prodigy or the embodiment of rigid Neoclassical ideals. A pupil at seventeen of Jacques-Louis David and a winner of the Prix de Rome, Ingres was indeed one of Nature's blessed and demonstrated his flair for drawing ("the probity of art") from the outset of his career. Yet many of the early portraits—e.g., of the astronomer Pierre-François Bernier (c. 1800), of his much-admired father (1804)—emphasize personality, not the stateliness we associate with his later work. In *Monsieur Belvèze-Foulon* (1805), a childhood friend from Montauban is depicted as a man of relaxed features, an engaging smile, and pleasingly unkempt hair. The sculptor Paul Lemoyne (c. 1810), in all his exuberant untidiness and set against a dark, scumbled background, could have been painted by Gros or Géricault. *Bonaparte as First Consul* (1804) offers a figure with tousled hair and well-formed legs, a fresh face and minimal trappings of glory (compared to later grandiosity), with a weirdly Flemish composition and

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attention to detail. Two years later, though, in *Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne*, the Consul has become a deity far removed from ordinary human concerns. Ingres's contemporaries were struck, and some were appalled, by the painting's almost Gothic ornamentation and hard, white light, but subsequent events proved that the artist's characterization of his hyperbolic, theatrical, and self-inventing monarch was apt.

Private lives and public personae, life's lurking untidiness and the natural desire for order, permanence, and adulation: it is in these areas, amid these often subtle tensions, that Ingres thrives, a fact confirmed by the great variety of portraits in the Washington show (which later traveled to the Metropolitan Museum in New York). He was not the dispassionate observer some critics took him to be (a denigration fostered by the Romantics who had an axe to grind), but something else entirely. Part of Ingres's success was tied (as it is for many individuals of unusual talent) to the era he was born into—and his willingness to connect with his times in ways that are not always obvious. There is a chronicling dimension to Ingres, and the forty-two paintings and over 100 drawings on view more than touched on that aspect of the exhibition's subtitle. What tumult and transition he lived through—the tag end of the Revolution, Napoleon's rise and fall, the Bourbon Restoration, the July Monarchy, the Second Republic, and the new tyranny of Napoleon III—and how many of the important players he knew, especially of the "haute bourgeoisie." What changes in fashion and fortune he saw. Yet those elements only begin to account for Ingres's hold on nineteenth- and twentieth-century audiences and the many artists from Picasso to de Kooning who admired him. The Napoleon portrait speaks to that allure; it has very little in common with other monarchial images of the day, suggesting as it does fanaticism (in the artist's obsessive detail as much as in the emperor's morbid glare), indifference to approved taste (no one at court liked it), and an almost fetishistic interest in shapes, colors, and folds of fabric over more humdrum realities. *Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne* is less about propagandizing for autocracy than it is about a Byzantine imagination.

An equivalent odd highlight of this exhibition was *Queen Caroline Murat* (1814), a long-lost painting of Napoleon's sister that was only rediscovered in 1987. With Vesuvius across the bay smoking in the background, the wife of the Emperor's puppet king of Naples is lavishly dressed in black (in mourning for Josephine?) and stands alone, a finger marking her place in a book, amid Baroque draperies and a mishmash of furniture. She is made to look like an awkward visitor in her own chamber—spouse-less, childless (though she was in fact neither), without an entourage or any of the other accoutrements of her tenuous royal position except for the minuscule book and bell on her velvet-covered table. The wheel of fortune is about to turn: a year later, a few weeks before Waterloo, she will flee for her life to Trieste and her husband will be shot by a firing squad. More than a few of Ingres's portraits, while glamorizing worldly triumph, put us in mind of transience and loss. His

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sitters often try a little too hard to insist on their dignity, stability, and worth.

Sometimes the feeling approaches satire—veiled, but still potent. The pallor, pinched face, and hand-on-hip pose of *Amédée-David, Comte de Pastoret* (1826), a classic fop and literary dilettante, was undoubtedly a comment on the artistocratic sitter's notorious pretensions and self-love. A small man strains to look important, but Ingres's focus on the apparel and accessories gives the game away. The humanity that imbues the drawings of true artists and men of more integrity—Franz Liszt, Charles Gounod, Hippolyte Flandrin, Niccolò Paganini, the architect Victor Baltard—is not to be found in the painting of the Comte. Yet none of this is to imply that we should be reading Ingres as a closet Daumier or a pre-Modernist covertly at odds with his time. He can't be remade in any extreme fashion to suit our more class-critical needs. (In the words of British curator John Shearman, from his book on Mannerism: "The purpose of history is surely the opposite of [modern reference]—[its purpose is] to show that the past is not the same as the present. Contemporary standards do not give the right guidance to understanding a past age; indeed in most cases they are a positive hindrance. In decoding messages from the other side, we get more meaningful results if we use their code rather than ours.") Though he was ultimately more comfortable with the constitutional monarchy inaugurated by Louis-Philippe, Ingres enjoyed a privileged position under Napoleon, the Bourbon brothers of Louis XVI (Louis XVIII and Charles X), the "Citizen King" Louis-Philippe, and Napoleon III. He was at ease with many of his affluent sitters and took issue with the experimental approach to art of Delacroix as well as the politics of Millet. So we do best to luxuriate in what is most clearly visible: breathtaking technique, cleverly deceptive realism (foreshortened arms and stylized poses that only appear natural), great sensitivity to eyes and hands, and as always a loving replication of fabrics. The Metropolitan's *Madame Leblanc* (1823), the Frick's *Vicomtesse d'Haussonville* (1845), and the Metropolitan's *Princesse Albert de Broglie* (1853) are as memorable for the silk gowns and wraps that adorn the women as they are for the individual faces. In the two portraits of Madame Moitessier (1851 and 1856)—a beauty of her time, but to our eyes, a bit vapid, a bit fleshy, and more than a bit ostentatious, as Ingres renders her—we might wonder again about conflicting or underlying motives, but not so with many of the others.

In *Louis-François Bertin* (1832), on the other hand, we have no ostentation, but plenty of bulk and self-assurance. Bertin was one of the most influential newspapermen of the time and had earned his lofty place in that rough-and-tumble world. Exiled by Napoleon and sent to jail by the reactionary Charles X, he stood by his belief in a moderate constitutional monarchy and was the paradigm of the new self-made man, ruined more than once but always ready to rise again. This is a much-reproduced painting, an icon of naturalism in Western art, but the joy of it as a centerpiece in this show—and the joy of it as it hangs

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in the Louvre—is that it remains as fresh and stirring as ever; no reproduction comes close to conveying its uncanny power. It can be argued that there has never been a face as well-modeled and flawlessly painted in its shadows and flesh tones. The many drawings Ingres saved, which were a key part of the display surrounding this painting, indicate just how painstaking a process it was to find the right pose for a man of Bertin's girth and aura. As it turned out, the claw-like hands on Bertin's knees (suggestive of his power and energy); the awkwardness of his bent-forward position in his chair (suggestive of a role in life very different from that of the aristocracy); the disheveled white hair; the sumptuousness of the browns, blacks, and muted golds; and lack of background paraphernalia say it all. Bertin's daughter was reportedly dismayed at the image, accusing Ingres of turning her lordly father into "a fat farmer." Twentieth-century viewers see a man of intellect and conscience who outlasted his enemies. The respect of the artist is obvious.

A close second at the summit of the Ingres canon are the two versions of *Ferdinand-Philippe-Louis-Charles-Henri, Duc d'Orléans* (1842 and 1844), less well-known paintings but almost as captivating. The son of King Louis-Philippe, Ferdinand-Philippe was a man Ingres admired; he had had the good sense to buy Ingres's *Oedipus and the Sphinx* and distinguished himself in battle in Flanders and North Africa. A perfect excuse, naturally, for the painting of a connoisseur's face, an elongated figure, and magnificent epaulets, medals, and white gloves against bright red military trousers. Once again, though, a purely formalist approach to an Ingres portrait is—well, let us say, inadequate. It is impossible to look at this *hommage* to youth and privilege the same way if you know that, only a few months after its completion, the popular, good-looking heir to the throne of France was in his grave, having fallen from his carriage after his horses bolted (a trauma comparable in its impact on the nation to the deaths of Princess Diana or John F. Kennedy, Jr., last summer). For that matter, knowing that Louis-Philippe's reign was to end, precipitously, in the revolution of 1848—another major social upheaval, which meant that Ferdinand-Philippe would never have ascended to the throne anyway—plays against our initial sense of awe. All of these portraits, in their style and élan and in the very nature of the genre, posit a timeless world that honors the individual and takes note of his or her accomplishments, station in life, or just plain good luck. But that world is partly a figment of our collective imagination, of our aestheticizing faculties. The moment recorded on canvas is just that—a moment. Life itself is rarely so stable or clear-cut, and it certainly wasn't in France in the first half of the nineteenth century. Behind the secure, stationary poses is the implied fact of relentless change. Perhaps there is more insight in Ingres's reluctance to invest too much time and worry in the genre than he has been given credit for.

After Ferdinand-Philippe's death, at the request of the grief-stricken

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King, Ingres made five copies of the top quarter of the painting, focusing on the prince's head. (It is interesting that in these he looks ever so much more pretentious and forbidding than in the life-sized version. Faces by themselves give so much away, alas.) One of these copies is owned by the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford and was on view in a wonderfully installed autumn exhibition with the less-than-thrilling title, "Here's Looking at You: Portraits from the Collections." Taking examples from all media and demonstrating how savvy the museum has been in its recent collecting, as well as how lucky it was in its early bequests, the show made a case for the continued vitality of portraiture itself. I don't know that I share that optimism about the future of the genre, but "Here's Looking at You" was also a model of what an institution can do with its own disparate holdings in a display that is both aesthetically fruitful and cost-effective. The Wadsworth's categories of portraiture ranged from studies in daily life to self-examination to memorializing, which gave us some crisp juxtapositions: Thomas Ruff and Dawoud Bey in the same room with John Singleton Copley; self-portraits by John Kane and James Ensor near John Coplans' photographic studies of his own nude girth and aging pores; Robert Arneson's three-dimensional re-creation of Jackson Pollock's fatal car wreck by John Frederick Peto's *trompe l'oeil* painting in memory of the assassinated Abraham Lincoln. It would be hard not to like a show that included Odd Nerdrum's evocative *Portrait of His Wife at Twelve* (1993), Max Beerbohm's witty caricature of Mark Twain (1900), and the always-understated Sally Mann.

Another autumn exhibition in Connecticut of uncommon interest was "James Tissot: Victorian Life/Modern Love" at the Yale Center for British Art. (An entire day might have been profitably spent at this museum, one of architect Louis Kahn's gems, in September. The permanent galleries on the fourth floor—Hogarth, Blake, Gainsborough, Turner, Constable—house one of the greatest collections in America. The Tissot occupied all of the third floor, while a heartbreaking exhibition entitled "Doomed Youth: The Poetry and the Pity of the First World War" shared space on the second floor with recent paintings by the contemporary artist John Walker. The experience of Walker was as much olfactory as visual, given the thick crusts of oil on canvas he likes.) Tissot is the beneficiary in our time of a revisionist wave, a late-twentieth-century reexamination *en masse* of those non-Impressionist painters of the last century formerly deemed too academic for modern tastes. This development has led to some godawful painters (e.g., Edwin Landseer, Millais, Gérôme) being taken more seriously than they should. Tissot, however, turns out to be a special case. There are times when his tight drawing and overdone compositions smother the subject and the mood in true Victorian fashion, but in many paintings he exhibits a flair for color and anecdote that separates him from his more prosaic peers even if it doesn't exactly align him with his friend Degas. *The Thames* (1876), rife with hints about the mores of the

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three boaters (a naval officer and two very relaxed women) on an outing in the least pastoral of urban waterway settings, is as droll and modern as a nineteenth-century narrative painting can be. His 1877 portrait of his dealer Algernon Moses Marsden is a sensuous tribute to an unrepentant sensualist; the tiger skin covering the armchair, the manicured nails, the well-groomed beard, and the Japanese vase are all rendered with equivalent finesse. Marsden has a "lifestyle" and dares us to take issue. The 1865 self-portrait, even more than Degas's 1868 portrait of the artist at the Metropolitan Museum, suggests why Degas would have found in a realist like Tissot a kindred spirit: there is more going on behind this ironic, bemused facade than we can know.

There were few portraits to linger over in the second half of the Whitney Museum's gargantuan survey, "The American Century: 1900–2000," except among the photographers (and many of those were quite good). The unruly terrain charted by curator Lisa Phillips was more concerned with inventiveness in form and use of materials, with politics and sociological trends. Nothing wrong with that—that's part of the American story, too—but the result was strangely diffuse and meager, and considering that 500 objects were on view (if one counted the books in the vitrines) spread out over five floors of the museum, achieving an effect of thinness was no small feat. But how could it have been otherwise, with all those alcoves, those bite-size encapsulations of complex movements and tidy labeling categories? If even Abstract Expressionism was robbed of its vastness by the cramped quarters (Clyfford Still, with one moderate-sized canvas in the corner, is spinning in his grave), the anarchic spirit of Fluxus and the East Village scene of the 1980s, the sensuality of Pattern Art, or the raciness of new Image Painting didn't have a prayer. So-called "Figurative Expressionism"—a dash of Fairfield Porter, one Larry Rivers, one David Park, one Edward Hopper—had the look of an afterthought. Then, too, the format of a chronological survey of such breadth and density made it hard to tell if we were being instructed in the history of art or the history of public relations and fleeting celebrity status: hence, Jeff Koons and Peter Halley, but no Jennifer Bartlett, Dorothea Rockbourne, Ellen Phelan, Joan Nelson, Sean Scully, Roger Brown, or Mark Tansey. What we were given in "The American Century, Part II, 1950–2000" could have been curated by a graduate student with a standard textbook and a pile of back issues of *ArtNews* and *Artforum*.

With theater tickets last July for the Williamstown Festival in western Massachusetts at one end of the month and for the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake at the other, I finally felt I had the excuse I wanted for a leisurely trip through Quebec and Ontario. Those few weeks provided me with an introduction to Canadian art, about which I was woefully ignorant, in more than a dozen small-town and big-city museums, and some memorable hours in a few of the best designed cultural centers in the Western hemisphere. A first experience of the

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Musée du Québec or the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa is a crucial moment for anyone interested in modern architecture.

Some of what I saw in July was as pleasingly canonical as one could imagine: a vast Honoré Daumier retrospective and a focus on van Gogh's iris paintings in Ottawa, a Degas/Pissarro print show in Quebec City, a selection of Renaissance art from Rome's Capitoline Picture Gallery on loan to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. Other exhibitions were more offbeat. My understanding of Duane Michals' photographs was always somewhat catch-as-catch-can, but a thorough retrospective of his work in Ottawa allowed for a much fuller appreciation of his technical skill, his mordant wit, and the underlying sorrow of even his most theatrical images. And, of course, the permanent collections of all these museums were sites for learning about the one field art-conscious residents of the United States have always been least exposed to: the achievements of Canadian painters over the last hundred years, including (or especially) the prewar landscape artists known as the Group of Seven—Franklin Carmichael, Frank Johnston, A.Y. Jackson, Lawren Harris, Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. McDonald, F.H. Varley—who sought to break away from the academic tradition and forge a new sense of Canadian identity, and Les Automatistes, the Canadian equivalent in the 1950s of the Abstract Expressionists. An exhibition at the Musée du Québec of photographs by Noel Perrin of some of the artists in the latter group was especially compelling.

The most engaging—because the least predictable—exhibition of my time in Canada was at the Musée des Beaux Arts in Montreal. A show designed to focus on the millennial yearning and anxiety we all feel (or are supposed to be feeling) at this eleventh hour, it carried the formidable title "Cosmos: From Romanticism to the Avant-Garde" and dealt with Western society's 200-year preoccupation with science, cosmic exploration, and changing ideas of the Sublime. Ably curated by a team that included Jean Clair, director of the Musée Picasso in Paris, and Pierre Theberge, director of the National Gallery of Canada, "Cosmos" was appealingly interdisciplinary, as many of the best exhibitions are, and in a loosely chronological layout brought together diverse paintings (nineteenth-century Romantics, the Hudson River School, Emily Carr, Mark Rothko, Yves Klein), meteorite fragments, stage set designs, NASA photographs and memorabilia, scientific instruments, and conceptual art, all of which had something to say about the modern drive to give shape to the unknown, to dream it, to chart it, to theorize its beauty and terror and pretend that we can master it. The opening room did its job with masterful clarity: an Alfred Stevens painting of a Victorian woman staring at the Milky Way, Caspar David Friedrich's *Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon* (1824), Goya's balloonists, a Stieglitz photograph of a dirigible, Redon's *The Eye* (1882). The urge to fathom the unfathomable long predates our century, but it was the business of "Cosmos" to explicate the ways in which the quest has changed,

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touching both artists and scientists, and the ways in which art practices have similarly evolved to chronicle that development.

From "Knowledge and Romantic Sensibility," the title of the first gallery, we moved on to "The Promised Land" and "Voyage to the Poles," filled with representations of man's new relationship to nature (think of Frederic Edwin Church's magisterial *Icebergs*), and to galleries focusing on the aurora borealis, the moon, and the imaginary cosmologies and mystical scientism of the Symbolists, the Synchromists, the Surrealists, and the Russian Constructivists. That artists like Lawren Harris (of the Group of Seven) and Jean-Paul Riopelle (of Les Automatistes) had a place in a museum show with Mondrian, Kandinsky, George Segal, Mark Tansey, and Ross Bleckner—and that those people had enough in common to be part of the same enterprise—is hard to believe secondhand. But when considering utopian aspirations or the role of the sphere, the void, and the spiral in modern art as part of this quest, the net can be cast very wide and did not even exclude parodies of all this high-powered daydreaming (e.g., Ilya Kabakov's 1988 reconstructed Soviet apartment house-nightmare, *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*). Best of all, intelligent as the catalogue essays were, the exhibition told its story and raised its questions by means of what we looked at on the walls and the floor. Between the simplicity of "The American Century" at the Whitney and the complexity of "Cosmos" at the Musée des Beaux Arts, there is all the difference in the world. We need more of the latter.

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BERT CARDULLO

Mirror Images, or Children of Paradise

THE CINEMA OF THE ISLAMIC THEOCRACY OF IRAN is chiefly known today for two qualities: its children's films (by which I mean movies about the young but not necessarily for them) and its self-reflexivity (by which I mean the posing of deep questions about fiction, reality, and filmmaking). It's common knowledge by now that children are often used as artistic subjects in Iran because directors there can deal with them openly or honestly—i.e., without sex, violence, philosophy, and politics, and therefore without running into the problem of censorship. This is not to say that these pictures are devoid of philosophy and politics, even socio-clerical criticism, only that such grown-up themes are often cloaked in the metaphorical raiment of children's stories, which themselves frequently blur the line between documentary and fiction. Children do the same, of course, but, again, the purpose of such blurring here is less mimetic than metaphorical: to investigate, in so repressive an autocracy as the Ayatollah's, the truth and nature not merely of the government's pronouncements, but also of cinematic art, of the very act of aesthetic creation or reportorial chronicling on film.

The Apple was the first of two recent Iranian children's films to come my way in the spring of 1999, before the summer crackdown on student demonstrators in the streets of Tehran—which might spell trouble for the (already limited) artistic freedom of the country's moviemakers as well. Only eighty-five minutes in length, this picture was made by Samira Makhmalbaf, the seventeen-year-old daughter of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the director of *Gabbeh* (1997) and the scenarist as well as editor of *The Apple*. The latter himself was partly the subject of Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990), which put the actual persons involved in a real-life fraud—the duping of a wealthy family by a poor man impersonating the famous director Mohsen Makhmalbaf—in a cinematic reconstruction of the story. Samira Makhmalbaf imitates Kiarostami's production method in *The Apple*, which metafictionally features the actual members of the family whose disturbingly true story is at its center. They are the Naderis: sixty-five-year-old Ghorbanali, the father; Soghra, his blind wife; and their twelve-year-old twin daughters, Zahra and Massoumeh. These girls were virtually imprisoned by their father in their Tehran home, away from sunlight, for all of their twelve years, which means that they cannot speak their native Farsi (although they can make sounds), they walk in

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an ungainly manner, do not bathe, and possess the ironic gestural tic of a literally wagging tongue. As you might guess, Zahra and Massoumeh have never attended school and know no children other than each other.

One thinks immediately in this context of Truffaut's *Wild Child* (1969) and Herzog's *Mystery of Kaspar Hauser* (1975), except that in *The Apple* there is no real mystery behind the twins' confinement. Their father, a religious man who makes his living by offering up prayers for others, reveals that he has kept his daughters locked up because their blind mother could not look after them, and he was afraid he might be dishonored if they were to come into physical contact with any of the neighborhood boys. The film begins when residents of this neighborhood in Tehran petition the local government to intervene on Zahra and Massoumeh's behalf. Or, more precisely, *The Apple* begins with a beautiful image of poetic clarity: the arm of one of the girls stretches out as far as it can, through the bars of the gate that restricts her and into the cinematographic frame, to pour water from a cup onto a scruffy, potted, flowering plant. Water, naturally, is what Zahra and Massoumeh require, figuratively as well as literally, if *they* are to grow, for they are not (or need not be), as their father benightedly believes, flowers who will automatically wilt in the sun of men's gazes.

Water is what the twins get when, as a result of the complaint against Ghorbanali Naderi, they are removed from his home by child-welfare authorities for a good scrubbing in addition to a short haircut. Zahra and Massoumeh are returned to their father after he promises not to keep them locked up anymore, but Ghorbanali immediately breaks his promise by secreting the girls once again inside the Naderis' sparse, dimly lit home with their sightless mother. Instead of a front door, this townhouse of sorts has a front gate that looks out onto a small courtyard which itself is gated, and we watch the father methodically unlocking and locking these gates as he comes and goes for work, food, and ice. Mind you, Ghorbanali is not overtly cruel or hateful toward his daughters, just obtusely, suffocatingly protective; and they, for their part, are anything but hostile toward him and their mother. Indeed, Zahra and Massoumeh do not seem unhappy, for they know no alternative to the life they are living.

They do, however, seem unconsciously attracted to sounds or images of growth and renewal: a baby crying across the alley; the plant inside their courtyard, whose flowers they attempt to replicate by splattering muddy handprints on a wall; a boy selling ice cream on the street; a woman washing clothes on her balcony next door. When the twins are finally freed from their domestic dungeon by Azizeh Mohamadi, a social worker dispatched to hold Ghorbanali to his promise, the first action they pleasurably take is to look into a mirror given to them by Mrs. Mohamadi, followed by their amused splashing of water onto their visages in that mirror. Literally as well as figuratively, the girls are seeing or identifying themselves for the very first time, which naturally is a

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prerequisite for their cognitive development. But the mirror is also a sly reminder here of the nature of filmic illusion, a clever reference to the (distortive?) mirror held up to nature—especially in a film whose performers reenact events from their own lives, or, as it were, mirror their private images and existences for all to see.

The result of Mrs. Mohamadi's visit to the Naderis is a reversal: not only does she set Zahra and Massoumeh free, she also locks their parents inside their own house, even as they did their children, and gives the uncomprehending girls the key. Next the social worker borrows a hacksaw from a neighbor and hands it to Ghorbanali with the warning that, if he doesn't saw through all the bars of the gate to his home, she will return to take his daughters away from him permanently. Meanwhile, as their humbled father saws and their enraged mother complains, Zahra and Massoumeh go out, after some homebound hesitation, to meet the world in the form of other children. Most important among them is a boy with a long fishing pole, at the end of whose line is attached—an apple. He dangles it from the window of an apartment building, the twins try but fail to grab it, then the boy shows them where they can buy their own apples, which they do with money cadged from their now compliant father.

Clearly the apple is meant to recall the Biblical temptation of Adam in the Garden of Eden. The difference, however, is that a boy is doing the tempting, not the female Eve, which means—aptly in as patriarchal a society as Iran's—that a male is responsible for the girls' symbolic introduction to knowledge or consciousness, just as a male was responsible for their cloistering. And with such an introduction to "sin" comes the suggestion that the world holds perils as well as pleasures, exasperations as well as ecstasies, for Zahra and Massoumeh Naderi, while their cave at least offered the sameness of ironclad, perdurable security. So *The Apple* is no simple fable about the blessed civilizing of primitives; rather, it is a complex metaphor both for the inhumane repression of women in a theorcratic state *and* for the merciful removal of those same women not simply from the pervasive precariousness of male-dominated or malevolent existence, but also (through such concealing clothing as the *chador*) from the incessant glare of the male gaze.

The metaphor extends itself when, after purchasing some apples, the twins meet two uniformed schoolgirls on a playground. Massoumeh innocently smacks an apple against one girl's face, then hands her the fruit. Baffled but beguiled by this attempt at communication, the girl kisses Massoumeh—who, interpreting the kiss as a reward for her aggression and not for the apple, strikes her new friend again! (Neither the first nor the last of *The Apple*'s divinely comic moments.) As the girls leave the playground after eating their fruit, the talk—at least for the two who can talk—turns to watches and the telling of time, an appropriate subject given the symbolic import of apple-eating together with literal departure from the world of play. For time is a human construct primarily connected with the workaday world, which is the one Zahra

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and Massoumeh will eventually enter now that they have gained consciousness as well as liberation of the self, and which is where (at an open-air market) they find watches for sale. The twins want one, even though they may not know its function yet, and it is to their father they turn again for the money.

They find him at home, dutifully watched by Mrs. Mohamadi as he continues to saw through the bars of his house-gate. And, with the social worker's permission, Zahra and Massoumeh free Ghorbanali from *his* prison by unlocking the gate with his key. The last time we see this man, he is on his way to the watchmaker's booth at the marketplace, escorted by his daughters and their two new friends. His wife remains behind, alone and bewildered, faceless beneath her *chador* as well as blind. Aptly if unwittingly, Soghra looks into her daughters' mirror, even as they had playfully put the same mirror up to their father's face. Then she walks through the open gates out into the street, calling for her girls but instead running into the apple—dangled by the same boy from the same apartment window. He teases Soghra with it but at last she is able to grab the fruit, at which point the frame freezes and *The Apple* ends. By now an otherwise meaningless cliché, the frozen frame here takes on poignant meaning, for it suggests that, frozen in space and time, the twins' mother can neither taste the fruit of knowledge nor escape the glare of light, neither retreat to the safety of her grotto nor advance to the call of the wild.

Beyond the use of this frozen frame, *The Apple*'s cinematography, by Ebrahim Ghafori and Mohamed Ahmadi, calls attention to itself by being of two distinct kinds: grainy, documentary-like, even blurred color footage, mostly for scenes at the child-welfare office; and smooth, devised, even warm images of muted browns and yellows tinged with turquoise for all other scenes, particularly those at the Naderi home. The turquoise naturally suggests the water—the fluid attention or liquid sustenance—that flowering plants, and blossoming girls, require to survive. But perhaps more interesting in this split between cinematographic styles is the suggestion of the turquoise-tinged scenes—compounded by the remoteness or distance of the camera during the documentary-like footage—that, however misguidedly raised by their parents, Zahra and Massoumeh still have and need those parents' love, even when these youngsters are finally left to their own devices in the streets, parks, and squares of Tehran. In other words, there is no slick, black-and-white opposition in *The Apple* between "good" authorities and "bad" fathers. Indeed, one could argue that Ghorbanali is the extreme, patriarchal product of the very system that now castigates his parental behavior. And when he laments to a neighbor "how hard it is to put back the pieces of a broken mirror," this father more than implies that his familial mirror has been shattered as much by the (state-run) media's distorted, sensationalized coverage of his daughters' privation as by that privation itself.

But has that familial mirror ultimately been shattered, or has it instead

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merely been turned around to reflect the outside world as much as the interior one of the Naderi home? That is the question, and it isn't easy to answer, for we cannot know what has become of the Naderi family, particularly of Zahra and Massoumeh, since *The Apple* was made. Certainly one can only wish them the growth and success enjoyed by the Iranian cinema itself ever since it emerged from the stultifying shadow of the imams and into the beaming light of the world screen—a growth and success apparently premised on the use of non-actors like the Naderis. Yet, if Iran is the home of today's one great national cinema, as several commentators have argued, how has it been able to achieve this status without the use of almost any professional actors?

Because, as Vernon Young argued years ago, "Film criticism can usually afford to disregard actors in a film's total effect, unless they are grossly bad or overwhelmingly good." Film criticism can so proceed because, in general in the cinema, theatrical performance, the acting of the words, is not the thing; more so than acting onstage, acting in film is part of a larger picture that depends for effect on its cinematographic rendering—on how it is photographed and edited and even scored (although, typically as well as paradoxically, movies that depend on non-actors, like *The Apple* and the other Iranian film I shall discuss, use little or no music to buttress their performances). And that larger picture includes the *faces* of actors, from which, without benefit of words, the camera can elicit character in a way that the stage obviously cannot.

For an example of what I mean, watch the "performances" of Zahra and Massoumeh Naderi as themselves: they don't speak any words, but they move us by the pathetic beauty of their sweetly smiling presences, by the simple framing of that clumsy, youthful beauty as it shuffles through the Tehranian cityscape of Samira and Mohsen Makhmalbaf's narrative. Like the rest of the "cast," the twins are neither overwhelmingly good nor grossly bad because they aren't really acting, they're *being*, and judgment of how good they are at being themselves is out of the question; each is allowing the camera to penetrate into the essence of her reality rather than presenting to that camera a reality framed by words. Perhaps the example of their father would be even better: in spite of his role as his daughters' jailer, despite his whining defense of his behavior toward them, and despite his sudden sheepishness in the face of the social worker's easy imperiousness, Ghorbanali appears to the camera-eye as a kindly, well-meaning if injudicious man. Which is exactly what he is.

What's true of the acting in *The Apple* is equally true of Mina Mohammad-Khani's performance in Jafar Panahi's *The Mirror*. Indeed, Mina bears a striking resemblance to, and may be the slightly younger sister of, Aida Mohammad-Khani, the kerchiefed little girl who had the leading role in the same director's *White Balloon* (1995). With their pudgy faces, frequently peevish stubbornness, and only occasional gap-toothed smiles, neither child may be a Shirley Temple in look or manner, but then these are no Shirley Temple movies. The Mohammad-

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Khanis are not programmed dolls with dimples and curls, but spontaneous human beings whose unconstrained want or iron will Islamic law will soon mechanically seek to stifle, lest it be transformed into a desire for gender equality combined with sexual freedom. The decision to display their homely naturalness in films that could easily have exploited other little girls' affected cuteness—from the point of view of Iranian censors, precisely because they *are* little girls and not young women—seems to me not only esthetically wise but also commercially refreshing. Western cinema, by contrast, has historically had no qualms about exploiting the cuteness, beauty, charm, seductiveness, or sensuality of *any* female in *any* movie.

Rest assured that this particular movie would never be mistaken for "any movie," even by Iranian standards. Rendered, like *The White Balloon*, in an approximation of real time, *The Mirror* concerns the efforts of a small girl, Mina, to make her way home through the busy streets of Tehran. When her pregnant mother fails to pick her up after school (first grade, in Mina's case) lets out, she begins her journey—scowling, kerchiefed, and with one arm in a sling, as we see her for the first time on the curb at the end of a lengthy, initial establishing shot in which the camera crosses and recrosses a crowded thoroughfare, as if it itself were searching for this girl. Despite lots of hustle and bustle to and fro, however—including a ride on a motorbike, a telephone call home, an encounter with her teacher, and several navigations of her own across the same dangerous roadway—Mina makes little progress. Moreover, her willy-nilly odyssey is sporadically mirrored or echoed, here and throughout the film, by the radio broadcast all over the city of a tumultuous soccer match between Iran and South Korea in which the teams frequently exchange the lead. Finally, the worried girl hops on a bus that she hopes will drop her off close to the apartment building where she lives, but that proves after ten-to-fifteen minutes to be heading in the wrong direction.

During this time aboard the bus, unpatronized as a child alone and isolated at the back in the women's section, Mina overhears the discontented, even bitter, conversations of a number of Iranian females. An old widow complains about the cruelty and ingratitude of her children toward her ever since the death of their father; a group of young women discuss a husband who cheats on his wife; a palm reader consoles a mother that her only child, a daughter, will be better than any son could have been; and some older women talk about an upcoming wedding between a badly matched couple. Through all of this the camera remains mostly in medium close-up on Mina or adopts her eye-level when it cuts to the women around her, and what we begin to see is a little girl whose feistiness, doggedness, and uninhibitedness are already being translated into the hard, critical demeanor of a middle-aged woman. When Mina finally has contact with the opposite sex in the form of a boy, this moment itself remains completely unsentimentalized: he is a street musician, and after he plays a tune from the men's section

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in front, someone silently gives the girl a coin to give to him, which she unceremoniously does as the bus continues on its way.

But it doesn't do so for long, for it has reached the end of the line without a sign of Mina's stop. When the almost tearful child complains to the driver that she needs to get to "Republic Square," he informs her that she must take a bus going in the opposite direction. Although Mina does so, *The Mirror* now takes a surprising turn at this, the halfway point or so of its ninety-five minutes. Miss Mohammed-Khani removes her sling, declares, "I'm not acting anymore," and climbs off the bus. After all efforts to change her mind fail, the child then walks off the "set" and starts to find her way home. Still miked for sound, however, Mina is followed by the cameras of the film crew (some of whom we occasionally glimpse), who say they want to see what they can salvage from their work-in-progress.

Yet Mina the actress's journey home proves to be just as willy-nilly as that of Mina the character. She asks for directions, first to "Parliament Square," then to "Victory Avenue"; she telephones home to no avail; Mina runs into the old widow from the bus, who says she is not a professional actress but was just playing herself; and this little girl takes several taxis through the teeming streets of Tehran, in one of which she listens to a heated conversation between the cabbie and another passenger about women's rights, working women, and the responsibilities of mothers and wives. Eventually, the lost child finds her way to the toy shop of the man who recruited her for the film, gives him back her body microphone despite his protests, and disappears into the large passageway of the apartment building where she lives—after reiterating to a crew member that she no longer wants to be in the movie. At about this time we also hear the last of the radio broadcast of the national soccer game, which Iran wins over South Korea by a score of six to two, after which *The Mirror* cuts abruptly to black.

Just as abruptly, *The Mirror* had shifted midway from an engrossing exercise in slice-of-life realism, à la *The White Balloon*, to a mock documentary in the style of *cinéma vérité*. We know that the second part of the film is "mock," not real, because Panahi—*The Mirror*'s screenwriter and editor as well as director—has said he was toying with this idea all along, but did not commit to it until the first little girl he had cast actually did refuse to continue in her role and had to be replaced with Mina Mohammad-Khani. At first one is tempted to feel betrayed by this conceit, yet what saves the movie from being an extended, somewhat cruel prank on its audience is the "mirroring" of its two segments. To wit, Part II essentially continues the narrative of Part I on a different level, for both parts are about a small child who is trying to find her way home through heavy traffic in a heavily populated city.

Still, Part II is shot in a radically different cinematic style from Part I, even as *The Apple*'s cinematography was made up of two disparate types. Part I is a fluid, controlled stretch of film that has been carefully crafted to simulate the randomness and spontaneity of everyday urban life. By

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contrast, Part II fakes the appearance of off-the-cuff, on-the-fly movie-making through jittery, handheld camerawork that sometimes seems to be farther off course than the little child it is attempting to follow, as she either totally eludes the lens's range or is completely hidden by passing vehicles; through a soundtrack that fades in and out, as if the microphone were malfunctioning; and through Farzad Jowdat's color cinematography, which moves from being merely sun-suffused in Part I to being sun-bleached or overexposed and even out-of-focus in Part II.

So *The Mirror* has its fun with us, but it keeps its promises, too, one of which is not only to examine the nature of cinematic illusion, but also to suggest that the invention of plots to make reality palatable or spectacular is a flight from the richness of real life. In this *The Mirror*, like *The Apple*, approaches pure or ideal neorealism as described by the screenwriter Cesare Zavattini in his ringing manifesto "Some Ideas on the Cinema" (1952):

> The artist's task is to make people reflect . . . on real things, exactly as they are. . . . No fable for a starving man, because that is less effective and less moral. . . . No other medium of expression has the cinema's innate capacity for showing things as they happen day by day—in their longest and truest duration. . . . The time has come to tell the audience that they are the true protagonists of life. Otherwise the frequent habit of identifying oneself with fictional characters will become very dangerous. The world is composed of millions of people thinking of myths.

Zavattini seems here to be calling for the making of documentaries, but he is really calling for a type of film in which the story is absolutely minimal and in which "the actor—as a person fictitiously lending his own flesh to another—has no more right to exist than the 'story.' In neorealism, as I intend it, everyone must be his own actor." By this definition, as Zavattini knew, none of the best-known films of Italian neorealism—*Open City* (1945), *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), or even *Umberto D.* (1951)—qualifies as neorealistic. But when he wrote in "Some Ideas on the Cinema" that "We have not yet reached the center of neorealism, which today is an army ready to start," little could this Italian artist have known that such an army would ultimately come out of undemocratic Iran—though he may have realized that its citizen-soldiers would consist chiefly of children in all their assiduous playfulness.

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DEAN FLOWER

Cynicism and Its Discontents

> Being judgmental must surely be one of the most joyful activities known to the species and it is cruel that other animals are denied this pleasure.
> —Eddie Harnovey

ARE WOMEN MORE CYNICAL THAN MEN? Martha Cochrane, the protagonist of Julian Barnes's latest novel,[1] answers her interrogator (male) in a characteristically acerbic fashion:

> "You put us on a pedestal in order to look up our skirts. When you wanted models of purity and spiritual value, something to idealize while you were away tilling the soil or killing the enemy, we accommodated ourselves. If you now want us to be cynical and disillusioned I dare say we can accommodate ourselves to that as well. Though of course we may not mean it, any more than we meant it before. We might just be being cynical about being cynical."

Not exactly at a loss for words, is she? Her argument resembles Emilia's in *Othello*: "The ills we do, their ills instruct us so." Martha's misanthropy emerges from forty years of dealing with disappointing men, starting with the male deity she refuses to pray to at school, the schoolboys she finds callow and stupid, and the father who disappeared (adultery, divorce) when she was very young. In the scene quoted above Martha confronts her antagonist, the loathsome billionaire Sir Jack Pitman, whose grandiose scheme it is to create a vast reproduction of England as a theme park on the Isle of Wight. Everything a tourist might wish to see and experience in England, from Stonehenge to Princess Di's grave, cream teas, and shopping at Harrods will be imitated, replicated, and parodied on Sir Jack's island. Barnes sets the novel in a near, all-too-easily-forseeable future where history is commodified, reality is never anything but "virtual," and nobody—least of all the tourists—knows what authenticity really is, or cares.

Sir Jack's cynicism appeals to Martha dangerously well, as hers does to him. "And what do you think of my mighty Project, such as it has been outlined?" he asks. Her answer gets her appointed to his Co-ordinating Committee: the scheme will work, she says, "Because no-one lost money

[1] ENGLAND, ENGLAND, by *Julian Barnes*. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00.

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encouraging others to be lazy." Martha's role is to play skeptic and critic to Sir Jack's visions. That he fairly oozes male arrogance and complacency only enhances the proposition for her. His enormous wealth and power figure in it too, of course. Soon Martha comes to believe that she can outwit him. The novel that emerges out of these conflicts is a peculiar mix of thoughtful characterization, issues-driven satire, grotesque sexual farce, and dystopic prophecy. Martha has some appealing depths, with her layers of cynicism and ambivalence, innocent hungers and sophisticated self-awareness. But Sir Jack is never more than a cardboard villain, whose Satanic CEO powers have to be exposed and humiliated in a prolonged, utterly unbelievable sting operation—one which Barnes seems to think the reader will find funny. Whenever the novel drifts away from Martha's point of view, its mechanisms creak, and you begin to wonder at the vulgarity of it all.

Not so at the start, where Martha remembers her childhood, particularly her jigsaw puzzle of England's shires, her mnemonic history lessons at school, and the prize categories at Agricultural Fairs—"Six Broad Beans," "Six Scarlet Runners," "Three Carrots, long"—all composing a poetry of known boundaries, definitiveness, truth. But she is too smart not to wonder at these memories: with time and repetition they become ever more distant, impure, and fictive, always "a memory of a memory" instead of something true: "It was like a country remembering its history: the past was never just the past, it was what made the present able to live with itself." Such conceptions of history have been brewing in Barnes's fiction ever since *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, where history tends always to be "fabulation," a construction shaped by desire and need rather than by any certainties of fact or authority. Interestingly enough, Martha's story resembles "The Survivor," the chapter where "fabulation" emerges as both a private neurotic delusion and a sanctioned public one. Hence the deep appeal of Sir Jack's imitation England: when was it ever *not* an artificial construction, a concatenation of images and legends and myths, a fabulation? Something that makes England "able to live with itself"?

Unfortunately the novel does not live up to the searching questions it begins with. Barnes is uncomfortable trying to be flippant and satiric like Waugh or Huxley. It comes out cynically—reductive, dismissive, and a bit nasty. You lose interest in Martha as a human being when she plays the role of "Appointed Cynic" too easily, or steps into the role of Sir Jack too conveniently—all to keep the novel going. Barnes's fatal weakness lies in being merely clever. He is always best when he disappears into his characters—as he does in *Staring at the Sun* or in *Talking It Over*—or when he is immersed in the richly fictive details of history—e.g., *Flaubert's Parrot* or Géricault's *Raft of the "Medusa"* (in "Shipwreck," the brilliant centerpiece of *A History of the World*).

Speaking of the richly fictive details of history, I can recommend Ferdinand Mount's brisk romp through the Restoration, which purports to be the memoirs of his own ancestor, Jeremiah Mount—nicknamed

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Jem.[2] The novel is based on actual references in the diary of Samuel Pepys to a certain "Mr. Mount," one of Pepys's drinking companions. A set of old ledgers turns up in a Kentish county records office in 1994, the poker-faced "Introduction" tells us, and they prove to be the sad life story of a man who rivalled and envied Samuel Pepys and wished nothing more than to destroy him. All this is pure fiction, of course, but it sounds plausible. The "editors" have transcribed the cramped handwriting and modernized the spelling and punctuation, emending an obscurity here, an archaism there—so you are lulled into accepting the illusion of a seventeenth-century voice. The parodic idea resembles John Barth's in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, but it is far less labored—and half as long. Besides, Mount knows all kinds of curious historical details of the period, an impression confirmed by the entertaining footnotes he supplies at the end.

For me the chief interest of Jem's narrative is the way it undermines the authority of Samuel Pepys. Well-informed readers have known, ever since the unexpurgated diary appeared in 1970, not only of Pepys's indefatigable energy and ambition, of his political savvy and resilience, but also of the full range of his sexual opportunism. Textbooks speak of his diary as "a great human document" and an epic whose "hero is Mr. Pepys." Jem's narrative provides a counter-text, the story of a youth eager to make love and money wherever he can, driven by foolish schemes and ill-advised loyalties, who gets knocked about by fate, chance, kings, and desperate men. He sells pornography, curries favor with General Monck, becomes a clerk in Cromwell's government, gets entangled with Monck's wife, falls earnestly in love with Pepys's wife (who will not have him)—and that is only the beginning. Where Jem struggles and loses ground, Pepys steadily advances. But you feel affection for Jem, whose innocent emotions make him so vulnerable, and a growing dislike for Pepys, who is detached, systematic, and businesslike about everything he does. Pepys takes sexual advantage of women whenever he can get away with it, or visits prostitutes furtively, never seeing (as Jem does) that his wife has a beautiful soul. In contrast to Jem, Pepys is not just a toady and hypocrite but something less human—he is a sort of automaton, an imperturbably selfish system for getting ahead. Jem's epic story is of loving generously, sacrificing himself to others, taking risks, floundering helplessly, and ending up a miserable failure. So why, this novel makes you ask, does history forget people like Jem, and claim that Pepys wrote "a great human document"?

Still, *Jem (and Sam)* is a very witty and amusing book. To writers like Ferdinand Mount, Julian Barnes, and John Barth history offers endless opportunities for impish improvisation, "fabulation," and topsy-turvical revision. Other writers find it a much grimmer proposition, as Frederick

[2] JEM (AND SAM), by *Ferdinand Mount.* Carroll & Graf. $25.95.

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Busch's latest novel indicates.[3] Its narrator, William Bartholomew, is a former sharpshooter in the Union Army who wears a prosthetic mask because half of his face has been blown away. Now a successful businessman by day, he stalks the streets of New York City by night, remembering each deadly bullet he fired in the Civil War. Fixing the story in time and place are a series of period maps and photographs of wharves, crowded streets, commercial houses. We also learn that Bartholomew was the soldier who posed for Winslow Homer's famous engraving, *The Sharpshooter.* What's more he befriends a certain lugubrious Customs Inspector—designated only as "M"—who once wrote a novel subtitled "The Whale." Soon it becomes apparent that the documentary impulse of the novel verges upon something darker: an attempt to suggest how Herman Melville might have seen the nation after the failure of his books and the catastrophe of the Civil War.

Not an easy task, but Busch manages it surprisingly well. He makes "M" laugh soundlessly too much and mimic Ahab transparently at times ("Shipmates!"), but the account of Melville's son's suicide is rendered with uncanny dignity and tact. Other veiled allusions to pasteboard masks, confidence-man masquerades, impenetrable walls, and the blackness of darkness seem to glide naturally, if not quite unobtrusively, into the story. Much of the credit here must go to the voice—formal, slightly mannered, austere—of William Bartholomew as he describes even the simplest gestures of M: "He laughed a quick hiccup of an unhappy laugh, then shut himself into silence, smiling without pleasure at his port, and then drinking it off." Here is another moment near the story's climax:

> The apprehension in the atmosphere was as powerful and prominent as the expectation we could feel, I might have said, from one another. M, despite the heat and the sweating oils that shimmered upon his face, wore his oilskins and his woolen cap. He was very pale, as if ill with a miscreant's conscience, yet his little eyes were active, even restless, and he squinted into the dark flannel of the night, and he spoke and spoke.

The language of this novel is so impeccably right that it persuades you to accept all kinds of cruelty, nightmare, and melodrama as if it were documentary fact. Bartholomew's ruthlessly exact memories of the way he picked off Confederate soldiers are especially fine. But so are his dark cityscapes, his images of violence, greed, and exploitation. And who better than the silent, despairing Herman Melville—who wrote almost nothing during these years—to understand and confirm this bleak vision of the city? Busch finds the era to be morally and spiritually the

[3] THE NIGHT INSPECTOR, by *Frederick Busch.* Harmony Books/Crown Publishers. $23.00.

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darkest in our history. He argues that the Civil War preserved and strengthened the North economically, but left a residue of cynicism and despair. His plot shows racism and the exploitation of minorities growing worse, corruption and the betrayal of traditional values running rampant. The climax of the novel holds out hope, then tramples upon it. In such a world, Busch seems to be saying, no wonder Melville was silent.

Pat Barker views history just as grimly as Busch, but I was disappointed in her latest novel.[4] It concerns a contemporary English middle-class family seething with problems—resentment, self-pity, anxiety, and rage. Fran feels burdened by her teething toddler Jasper, by her difficult ten-year-old Gareth, by her advanced pregnancy, and by her self-absorbed husband Nick's problems—his dying grandfather Geordie, his unhappy daughter Miranda from a previous marriage, the hospitalization of Nick's ex-wife. Gareth and teenage Miranda are particularly good at despising each other. Then history holds a mirror up to all this nastiness: removing wallpaper in their new home the family uncovers a large-scale mural painting of a Victorian family—the Fanshawes, 1898. But the portrait is crude, sexually obscene, and full of hate. "It's horrible," says Fran, riveted by the image—as they all are. "It's us," says Miranda, and nobody can disagree.

Unfortunately Barker does not develop this promising material very well. The Fanshawe history remains nebulous: its ghosts appear, but with little sense of inevitability. Was it fiction or not that little James Fanshawe was murdered? And does that story really impinge on the present? Nick is more troubled by his grandfather's memories—nightmares of the Great War (Barker's favorite material, used so well in *The Regeneration Trilogy*)—than he is by the Fanshawes' sins. And nothing terrible, or terrible enough, happens to justify such a portentous beginning. At one point Nick finds himself, after a desperate chase, staring anxiously at his three silent children, wondering "what they see, what *they* make of *him*" (my italics). I suspect Barker derives this from the desperate governess of *The Turn of the Screw*, who wonders the same things and terrifies those she attempts to protect. If so James's 1898 story only emphasizes how diffuse Barker's narrative is, how little tension it generates. The novel's most interesting revelations concern Nick's grandfather, but his history—lucid, documentary, fully believable—seems to belong in a very different novel from the one driven, supposedly, by the Fanshawe melodrama.

Barker won well-deserved prizes for *The Eye in the Door* (1993) and *The Ghost Road* (1995), completing the trilogy that began with what I still regard as her finest work, *Regeneration* (1991). Read these books by all means, but don't expect much from *Another World*. For a richly convincing, sharply-focused story of familial breakdown and violence, consider

[4] ANOTHER WORLD, by *Pat Barker*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $24.00.

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instead Judy Troy's latest novel, her third work of fiction.[5] It's about an ordinary teenage boy in South Dakota whose father, out of the blue, kills a young woman in a local motel, then disappears completely. Mike's confusion and pain worsen over the next several months, as he tries to sort out what he feels, who he is, and where his loyalties lie. The mode is reminiscent of Hemingway's Nick Adams stories. Everything seems to be at the surface, sequences of fact and motion, with the deeper things never analyzed but all the more affecting for that.

> He got up, put on his jeans, and went into [his mother's] room. "What are you doing?" he said.
>
> She didn't answer. She was piling his father's clothes into storage boxes she kept under the bed. There were more clothes than Mike had expected, even though his father had taken things with him. There were still pants, shirts, sweaters, and shoes.
>
> "I want to think of him as dead," Mike's mother said.
>
> The clothes were blurry now. Mike kept his back to his mother until his vision cleared, by which time she was crying. When he turned around, she was holding his father's blue shirt up to her face.

Troy is just as palpably convincing about Mike's sexual hungers and ambivalences, his flickering moments of self-understanding, and his overwhelming sadness, especially toward the end when he goes away to college, more alone than ever. In fact the whole novel is beautifully written, always spare and understated, everything in it utterly authentic.

Now I want to mention a group of interesting if not always successful short story collections. Such work deserves review if it amounts to more than a miscellaney of sketches and exercises, if the stories cohere in some way, or reinforce one another, or evolve and develop a theme. Annie Proulx's Wyoming stories[6] do that, but I found their characterization so thin and their plots so strained that their only redeeming feature was their rendition of the landscape. But what a feature. Proulx's fiction shows again and again the intimate relation between a violent, merciless geography and the behavior of people who try to live in it. Richard Bausch's stories too converge on a single theme: domestic arguments.[7] Not that Cheever, Updike, and Beattie did not pave the way, but Bausch's stories—this is his fourth collection—pay the most loving attention to husbands and wives, parents and children, divorced couples, prospective couples, all angrily going after each other, having "words." These stories are funny and awful at the same time; one of them is even called "Two Altercations." They started me wondering whether the way we live now—consider "shooting sprees," consider "road

[5] FROM THE BLACK HILLS, by *Judy Troy*. Random House. $23.95.
[6] CLOSE RANGE: Wyoming Stories, by *Annie Proulx*. Scribner. $25.00.
[7] SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME, by *Richard Bausch*. HarperCollins. $24.00.

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rage"—isn't fundamentally defined by a willingness to lash out, to find fault in others, or listen only to our own arguments. David Foster Wallace's stories[8] are about "hideous men" because they rant hypocritically and, alas, he seems amused by the phenomenon, as if he were not covertly enjoying his own verbal aggressiveness by impersonating them. Christopher Tilghman writes about men who are often angry and uncomprehending, but his stories work toward very quiet resolutions and moments of precarious understanding.[9] You feel almost grateful for the effort he puts into healing or assuaging the hostilities between brothers, say, or between spouses who cannot be sure there is any way to reconcile their differences. David Gates's stories are more abrupt and satiric, nearer to physical violence, and less resolved.[10] "He has never hit me, and only once or twice in our two years has he raised his voice in anger," one story begins. But the subtle warfare in this marriage is internecine nonetheless. Do not trust the book's title: these stories, frequently in the vernacular of geezers who have no interest in anyone but themselves, or wives who are clinically depressed, are never misty-eyed about the world's wonders. Gates does irritable, sarcastic voices unerringly and amusingly, but they all have an undercurrent of cynicism, anger and self-hate.

For an antidote to so much violence and cynicism I turn finally to the best novel I have read for this chronicle, indeed the best new novel I've encountered in years: Elliot Perlman's *Three Dollars*, which was published in Australia last year.[11] Its narrator, Eddie Harnovey, tells you his life story, from childhood innocence to his present middle-aged ruin, barely hanging on with his last three bucks. Yet he has an irrepressible sense of humor, an ironic intelligence, and greater depths of feeling than you suspect at first. He says of his wife's insomnia, "she had mastered the art of waking up five or six times a night having fallen asleep only once." Of his Uncle George he remembers: "He smelled of beer so much that thereafter beer would always smell a little of him." On his own temptation to criticize someone he remarks, "Being judgmental must surely be one of the most joyful activities known to the species and it is cruel that other animals are denied this pleasure." Humor is how Eddie tries to fend off pain, but the two are often inseparable. At his wedding, for example, he comments ruefully about his poor parents: "They had wanted so little and yet had always managed to get a little less." That's a typical syntax for Eddie. Here's a little more of the same scene:

[8] BRIEF INTERVIEWS WITH HIDEOUS MEN, by *David Foster Wallace*. Little, Brown and Company. $24.00.

[9] THE WAY PEOPLE RUN, by *Christopher Tilghman*. Random House. $21.95.

[10] THE WONDERS OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD, by *David Gates*. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.00.

[11] THREE DOLLARS, by *Elliot Perlman*. MacMurray & Beck. $22.00.

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> My parents stood so close together, holding one another by the arm, it looked as though they were one being, a small and fragile one. . . . As happy as I was to be marrying Tanya, to see my parents, joined to each other as they were, and so newly small, gazing upon us both with their radiant eyes like shiny wet marbles, filled me with a profound sadness that made it unbearable to look at them.

I wonder if there's enough context here to convey how heart-rending these words are. *Like shiny wet marbles.*

What emerges from Eddie's story is a vision of a heartless society, one whose only interests are economic, doing violence to hapless human beings. Tanya tries to write a Ph.D. thesis on that subject, and falls into despair. Eddie becomes a chemical engineer and works for an increasingly Kafkaesque government bureaucracy. At first the economic theme seems clear enough. Eddie's friend Paul becomes a successful investment banker and therefore the enemy. And the glamorous Amanda, who appears fatefully in Eddie's life every nine-and-a-half years, seems to represent the cruelty of unbridgeable class differences. But the truth turns out to be more complicated and human than that. Let me oversimplify it by saying that Eddie loves his wife and child with more passion than wisdom. The lesson he learned (or thought he learned) from his suicidal uncle, who confused affluence with love, was "the folly of avoiding candour in a marriage." Then tragically Eddie commits that folly. And Tanya does too, in her own way. As if dimly aware of such ironies Eddie even refers to *Jude the Obscure* and to *Death of a Salesman.*

Yet gloom is never the tonality of this complex, richly-rewarding book. The publisher knew that, and smartly elected to omit the puffery and simply quote a charming passage on the dust-jacket flap. So let me conclude similarly. After observing wryly that "things tend to fall" and that makes "some of us . . . say that they have fallen into place, almost wherever they land," Eddie describes the birth of his daughter:

> But everything was alright, first cut and then dried as the obstetrician had promised. I still had all those questions but it did not matter anymore that I didn't know anything. When I held her I gained the simple strength of an overwhelming love, an irrepressible euphoria. Tanya was exhausted. She looked up at us and smiled. Everything had fallen into place.

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ALEXANDRA MULLEN

Wilkie Collins' Beached Tale

SEX, INTRIGUE, AND ARCANE INFORMATION are the customary ingredients of beach books. And the Victorian novelist Wilkie Collins might be the best beach-book writer of all time: *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* are probably the best known, but those of us Collins fans who trade titles at cocktail parties love to analyze the weird pleasures of *No Name, The Law and the Lady, Armadale, Heart and Science,* and *Poor Miss Finch.* The stock in trade of beach books is escapism, and as it turns out the first novel Collins ever wrote, when he wanted nothing more than to escape into the life of a fiction writer, is set at the beach.

In the fall of 1844, the twenty-year-old Collins had already been an apprentice, probably unpaid, in the London offices of the tea merchants Antrobus & Company for about three years. This experience had provided more than enough time and tea leaves to persuade him that his future lay elsewhere. Instead, he gave himself a kind of literary apprenticeship, writing "tragedies, comedies, epic poems and the usual literary rubbish," as he later put it. For an aspiring literary type, even the daily commute down the Strand to Antrobus & Company was tantalizing: Collins passed the offices of *Punch, The Illustrated London News,* the *Observer,* and the *Illuminated Magazine* (which had published Collins' first signed article in 1843). Still sitting at his stool in the tea house, Collins started a novel; he left behind the world of the tea house, the epic poem, and the Strand, and went to Tahiti—Tahiti before it was seen by Western eyes.

In the next few months, a strange and not entirely appetizing brew poured forth: Iolání, the eloquent and evil priest of the war-god Oro, has tired of his illicit relationship with the lowly born but noble-hearted Idía. He plans not only to abandon her, despite her pregnancy, but also to murder their baby at birth. Idía and her beautiful young charge Aimáta (now Iolání's lustful object) escape into the dark interior of the island. In a gap marked by asterisks, a son is born. They are eventually pursued by Iolání who has persuaded the island's men that Idía must be sacrificed to propitiate the gods for an imminent battle against a neighboring tribe. A lot more ensues: an interrupted sacrifice; a few escapes and chases both on foot and by canoe; a battle; deaths by sharks, poisoning, and by being thrown off a cliff; and a crazed island pariah who preserves the life of Idía's baby and who ultimately brings about Iolání's end. All this in 180 pages.[1]

[1] IOLÁNI; or, Tahíti as it was. A Romance, by *Wilkie Collins.* Ed. by *Ira B. Nadel.* Princeton University Press. $24.95.

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Thirty-two years later Collins returned to the South Seas, this time for thirteen pages. "Mr. Captain and the Nymph," also printed as "The Captain's Lost Love," is a more polished, and far more conventional, tale: a polyglot merchant captain (made unusual only by his dandyism) seeks sources of sandalwood for his owners' profits. He finds himself off the charts at an unknown island—"a glorious green island . . . girt about by a coral-reef, and having in its midst a high-peaked mountain which looked, through the telescope, like a mountain of volcanic origin." The natives are happy "dusky islanders, astonished to see white men"; the men, "in their smooth musical language," say "Come and eat!"; the "plump black-eyed women" say "Come and be kissed!" The priest of the even more hidden Holy Island is noble and benevolent; his virginal daughter, whose only playmates are the turtledoves (anticipating W.H. Hudson's Rima), has never seen any man before the captain secretly invades their taboo island. This Nymph has the dusky sexiness Margaret Mead was looking for: "'You feel soft and friendly,' she said with the fearless candour of a child. 'Squeeze me again. I like it.'" Alas, north and south, dandy and savage, cannot be joined in this life—the island sinks beneath the waves, the captain has a vision of the Nymph (also named Aimáta) beckoning him on—and now he never goes to sea. This story starts making *Ioláni; or, Tahíti as it was. A Romance* look interesting.

Bernard Smith, in his book *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768–1850*, claims that early Western writings about Polynesia marked out a dispute about the nature of savages: Were they essentially noble or ignoble? The fact that "Mr. Captain and the Nymph" plumps for nobility is part of what makes it dull. The younger Collins experimented more daringly with his sources. Collins always did his homework, and his main background reading for the Tahitian setting was William Ellis' *Polynesian Researches* in four volumes—the 1832 edition was still in his possession at his death. In 1816 the London Missionary Society had sent Ellis to Tahiti, then characterized by a fellow missionary as "a vortex of iniquity, the Sodom of the Pacific." Ellis drew a picture of unambiguously ignoble savages: a priestly caste that encouraged infanticide, constant warfare, indolence, luxuriance, and polygamy. Collins obviously picked out all the good stuff.

And yet Collins' Tahiti in *Ioláni* is not quite Ellis' Tahiti. It is not surprising that Collins, as the son of evangelical Christians and as an aspiring popular novelist, should explicitly deplore the racial and religious faults of the Tahitians. Far more surprising is the amount to which his plot and characters implicitly jettison the standards of his upbringing and Mrs. Grundy. For one thing, Idía's story aside, sex in *Ioláni* can be both enjoyable and a force for good. The young Aimáta is the model here. (It is very convenient that Aimáta's genuinely Polynesian name happens to recall the French verb *aimer*.) With her "supple and delicate form, unrounded by maturity as yet, but tempting to look upon," she is "still as God made her; unpolluted by misery and unmarred by man." Ioláni is not the only lascivious male looking at her unaware: "In her restless slumber, her light clothing had become so discomposed, as to leave the upper part of her form—so delicate in

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shape, so enchantingly soft and dusky in hue—almost entirely uncovered." Mahíné, the victorious red-blooded youthful king, shows some reluctance in giving up the war-club, even for Aimáta's sake, but she calls on an alternate notion of duty.

> "Look on [Idía's baby], Mahíné," she pleaded, "this is the trust that she left me at her death; and how shall I fulfil it, if we remain in peril here? By *her* care, was I preserved for *thee*; and should I not labour for the safety of the child that she loved, as *she* laboured for *mine*? . . . Let us leave this place—oh, my beloved, let us make our habitation, where the woods shall be safer to our feet, where our dwelling shall need no guard, and where the weapon of war shall become a stranger to thy hand!"

Aimáta is an angel in the hut, pointing ever upward. As perhaps the first man in Tahiti to take a woman's claims to higher civilization seriously, Mahíné loses his kingdom but gets his reward.

> Charmed by the delights of their retirement, the inmates of the dwelling, have no hope—no wish, beyond their island seclusion. The life of peace she so lately longed for, Aimáta has obtained; and, its dream of lawless ambition, has vanished, for ever, from Mahíné's heart.

Mahíné and Aimáta might have been married in a primitive Tahitian ceremony, surrounded by the skulls of their ancestors, but in their isolated grass hut at the end of the novel, they are evolving toward Victorian domesticity. Can Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester be far behind?

Collins opens up the possibility of a larger societal evolution as well. Ioláni is the chief force at work here. His villainy is allied with potentially more promising characteristics: "His natural malignity of disposition, was shielded by the most indomitable patience and contrivance. His cruelty, was refined by invention and aided by caution." This mixture of motives raises him above the common herd. For instance, Ioláni appears to his people to be willing "rather to suffer the indignities that had been heaped upon him, than to embroil the people in war, and thereby, make the innocent suffer for the guilty. Such a thing had been unknown before. It was the first instance of consideration for human life, having overpowered the desire of satisfying private enmity, that had happened in the Island." His people happen to be wrong, but the effect of Ioláni's slyness is to give them a new possibility for civilized behavior. Ioláni is an exceptional priest of an indolent and id-driven people:

> The virtue of never betraying a comrade, is a common human quality; but, the virtue of never betraying oneself, is the rarest of superiorities. This accomplishment, necessary to a good man, is indispensable, to a villain; and it was possessed to perfection, by the Priest.

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Iolání's self-control and Aimáta's loving preservation are the keys to civilization and moral evolution.

I have to confess I've put the best spin on Collins' work. For all of *Iolání*'s activity and incident, the novel has a curiously static quality, partly explained by the almost complete dominance of exposition and narration and equally complete absence of conversation—if I'm right, the first actual conversation, as opposed to speechifying, occurs on page 144. Plot transitions are awkwardly handled ("Ere we proceed further, it will be necessary to pause in the progress of our narrative, to account for the strange re-appearance of the Priest"), background information on canoes and customs obtrudes, and character is subordinated to both landscape and action. The most interesting scenes depend less on external thrills than on incipient touches of psychology: Iolání deciding whether to kill his crawling baby; Iolání beginning to lose his nerve and subordinating himself to his old master, the island's Sorcerer; the island's outcast finding the baby and bringing him back to his cave; the stories of the victims of battle; the banished king discovering he loves the simple pleasures of his exile; and Mahíné's struggle in choosing to listen to Aimáta's amorous arguments and giving up Tahiti's warrior life. These moments are rare and brief. In general, the material controls Collins, and we get the unhappily arranged marriage of gothic and guidebook.

Iolání is too easy a target to make it worth spending much time picking out its absurdities and weaknesses, and it shouldn't be a surprise to learn that it was never published. Longmans said they'd publish it if Wilkie's father, the well-known painter William Collins, would pay the costs—he turned down the honor; Chapman & Hall declined the honor of publishing altogether. Wilkie resignedly put the manuscript to one side and went, literally this time, to Paris. The manuscript sat neglected for the next thirty-odd years until Collins used it as either a rough draft of a play or a thank-you present to the American theatrical producer Augustin Daly, who had been the catalyst behind Collins' theatrical success in America. After Daly's death, the manuscript was first auctioned off in 1900 and then again in 1903. It resurfaced at auction in 1991 and has been bought by a purchaser who has allowed publication but who apparently chooses to remain nameless.

The primitive body of *Iolání* now comes clothed in full scholarly regalia: a lengthy introduction, lists of textual variants, and notes by the scholar Ira B. Nadel. Claiming that *Iolání* is "the embryo of Collins's later fiction," Nadel adduces many reasons why we should pay attention to the novel: "the construction of plot"; "suspense as a key device"; "the development of character" integrated with action; a "critique of corrupt authority and individual oppression"; "a fascination with crime, especially in the paradoxes of the criminal mind"; and "the complex presentation of women who are assertive, independent, and aggressive—but at a price." Well, yes and no, mostly no. The most important claim for *Iolání* might be that it inspired the author to practice polygamy

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himself: he maintained two irregular households, one with children. But it is true that, in light of the development of Collins' literary imagination, particularly displayed in the novels of the 1860s, *Iolani* makes chasing parallels and precedents more than a parlor game. Nadel's most discriminating points—about Collins' presentation of villains and women—are worth thinking about more closely.

When Collins traded historic Tahiti for Victorian England, he made the familiar exotic rather than the other way around. By his third (but second published) novel, Collins began to hit his stride. *Basil* (1852) is set in current-day London and tells the tale of a young man's obsession with a sexually perfidious woman from the petty bourgeoisie. Like *Iolani*, it is a tale of sexual intrigue, maiming, and murder (indeed, by being thrown off a cliff). But the journeyman narrative has been replaced by the first-person narrative of the melancholic Basil, and the hypertrophied eeriness of Tahiti by the gimcrack world of the mushrooming suburbs. *Basil* is still a novel that probably only lovers of Collins should read. But as his technique progressed, Collins refined his ability to integrate the bizarre into our quotidian world: our hero might take a medicine that turns him graphite blue; our heroine might be deaf and dumb; our villain might lock women up in insane asylums; our villainess might turn her hand to governessing, forgery and murder; but they all—heroes and villains—remain recognizably human.

Collins became particularly deft at blending the factual and the comic, the homey and the exotic, the familiar and the grotesque. His later fiction provides very memorable villains and scalawags. Take, for example, the legless Miserrimus Dexter who whizzes about in a proto-wheelchair—he calls himself the Modern Centaur, half man, half machine; or the versatile con man Captain Wragge who keeps "skins to jump into"—alternate personalities prepared for the quick escape; or everybody's favorite Count Fosco—enormously fat and fond of his white mice—who predates Professor Moriarty as the Napoleon of Crime. Their intellectual and imaginative acuity, their self-consciousness and shamelessness are what continue to fascinate. Above all, they are all entertaining talkers. The foes most worthy of their steel are women, and we most enjoy the battles of wits between Count Fosco and Marian Halcombe, Captain Wragge and Mrs. Lecount, Miserrimus Dexter and Valeria Macallan.

But villains, even charming villains, are easy; virtue is hard. And in the sentimental Victorian equation of virtue with women, convincingly drawn female characters who also happen to be good are as rare as island-entrapped virgins. Collins' great friend and theatrical collaborator Charles Dickens, for example, was also astonishingly good at portraying convincing villains, but was markedly less good at portraying convincing good women. In Dickens' case, it's verging on a truism to say that his only psychologically convincing women are the ones who are threatening or grotesque in whole or in part: Miss Havisham and Estella, Rosa Dartle and Miss Mowcher. Collins' Aimáta and Idía are crude but

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clear prototypes for later intelligent and resourceful women such as Valeria Macallan and Marian Halcombe, who, if Collins hadn't made her fall ill part way through the novel, would have foiled his plot as well as Count Fosco's. Ultimately Collins has the skill to enlist our sympathies for his version of the fallen woman, the appropriately named Magdalen. In *No Name* (1862), the whole Victorian world of solid family, solid worth, and solid furniture is revealed to be as illusory as a stage scrim, but only the illegitimate, the outlaws, and the dispossessed are privy to the secret. Towards the end of the novel, Magdalen has become educated in the ways of this world. Lady and lady's maid are interchangeable: "Shall I tell you what a lady is? A lady is a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance. I shall put the gown on your back, and the sense in your head." In the last few pages, Collins slips in a "moral" end: Magdalen repents of her very many sins. But then he gives her earthly rewards: her inheritance, a loving husband in the charmingly named Captain Kirke—and she doesn't even have to move to Australia to enjoy them.

Perhaps writing *Ioláni* meant that the apprentice novelist Collins could add historical romances to his list of things not to write. He ended up specializing in sensation fiction. Freed in large part from the demand for courtship stories, he tested alternatives to Victorian taboos and inspired a richer, more ambiguous mixture of sympathies. And it is particularly through his enterprising women that Collins discovered an almost unknown country. When grounded in psychological realism and rip-snorting adventure, there is honor in getting people to turn pages, to read for the plot. Wilkie Collins just needed to get off Tahiti and his tea stool and into the world.

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BROOKE ALLEN

Shades of Matthew Arnold

THERE ARE ROUGHLY TWO TYPES OF LITERARY CRITICS: those, like F.R. Leavis or John Middleton Murry, who approach their work with religious intensity and intransigent standards; and the laxer, more hedonistic souls (Cyril Connolly, for instance, or Randall Jarrell, or Edmund Wilson) for whom literature seems an object of delectation. The first sort makes demands of literature; the second wallows happily in it.

James Wood, the thirty-four-year-old Englishman who is currently the book critic at *The New Republic*, belongs firmly in the former camp. He is a deeply serious and engaged reader, too serious perhaps to appeal to everyone. A modern Matthew Arnold, he wrestles mightily with the big questions (God, faith, blasphemy) without wasting his energies on minor matters. He is intolerant not only of mediocrity, but even of quality when it is achieved on terms other than his own. Irony does not interest him much; neither does humor, although he himself can be very funny when he chooses. William H. Pritchard, in his *New York Times* review of Wood's new, first volume of essays, *The Broken Estate*,[1] puts his finger neatly on Wood's principal limitation as a critic: he "lacks interest in and sympathy for novels fueled by an ironic or comic sense that somehow accommodates itself to the world. . . . [S]uch worldly accommodation . . . may be a more important and attractive way of dealing with the broken estate than Wood can allow."

Wood's "broken estate," the theme he has chosen to bind together this collection, is hardly a new subject in literary and social criticism; it refers to the decline of Christianity in the mid-nineteenth century, a topic over which an excessive amount of ink has already been spilt. "I would define the old estate," he writes,

> as the supposition that religion was a set of divine truth-claims, and that the Gospel narratives were supernatural reports; fiction might be supernatural too, but fiction was always fictional, it was not in the same order of truth as the Gospel narratives. During the nineteenth century, these two positions began to soften and merge. At the high point of the novel's triumph, the Gospels began to be read, by both writers and theologians, as a set of fictional tales—as a kind of novel. Simultaneously, fiction became an almost religious activity. . . . Flau-

[1] THE BROKEN ESTATE: Essays on Literature and Belief, by *James Wood*. Random House. $24.00.

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> bert, a pivotal figure here, began to turn literary style into a religion while Ernest Renan, in his *Vie de Jesus*, began to turn religion into a kind of style, a poetry.

All this is obvious enough. Wood's innovation is to make the rather bold suggestion that the rise of the novel in fact *caused*, or at least was one of the causes, of the degeneration of the Gospels from truth to mere fiction; that "there is something about narrative that puts the world in doubt. . . . [I]t was not just science but perhaps the novel itself which helped to kill Jesus's divinity, when it gave us a new sense of the real, a new sense of how the real disposes itself in a narrative—and then in turn a new skepticism toward the real as we encounter it in narrative." It's a provocative theory, unprovable, of course, even undemonstrable, but equally impossible to dismiss.

Wood's childhood and background provide an appropriate beginning for his intense, lifelong contemplation of religion and its ebb. His parents belonged to an evangelical church that had been "renewed" in the 1970s and considered itself "charismatic." He grew up with the constant and unnerving spectacle of people "speaking in tongues, dancing in the spirit, ecstatic worship, healing, miracles, prophecies." As a schoolboy, he became a chorister at the ancient cathedral of his native city, boarding, like all the choristers, at the cathedral school, and was thus exposed to a very different variety of Christianity. The music was beautiful, the surroundings sublime. "We were vaguely aware," he recalls of himself and his schoolmates, "that a form of religious liturgy surrounded us, a rather pleasant, lax, aesthetic liturgy. But it impinged little."

At the age of fifteen, totting up reasons for and against belief in a notebook, he rejected Christianity. The clincher, as it has been for so many apostates, was the impossibility of reconciling the existence of God with that of evil. "The dilemma," he wrote early last year in a *New Republic* editorial, "was the torment of my adolescent years. . . . My youth was full of anxious ambitions of atheism."

It is a commonplace, even banal tale, the rough outline of which seems to have changed very little from the Victorian era to our own. Wood's arguments against God are timeworn and pedestrian ones. But the manner of Wood's loss of faith, and its apparent intensity, has left its indelible mark on his career, his focus, his interests, his obsessions. It should come as no surprise, after reading his introduction, to find that the writers who most possess him are Melville and Lawrence, lapsed Calvinists who remained forever God-haunted, whose capacity for religious emotion was so immense that it stained and heightened their every metaphor, their every observation. Melville in particular: it is "the flickering horror of his refusal to believe, and . . . the sour clarity of his refusal entirely to unbelieve" to which Wood responds—which, one might almost venture, he most admires. The most resonant sound, for Wood as for Melville, is the echoing silence of the void, the stillness that marks where God is not.

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The heroic nature of Wood's own theological struggle has left him intolerant of those to whom either faith or lack of faith have come more simply. He has little patience with the sort of atheistic "serenity" that treats religion "as if it were, almost self-evidently, nonsense—think of Stendhal, Russell, even Hume." Plenty of profound thinkers and even great artists come from this tradition; but they hold no particular interest for Wood.

Why not? If, as he claims, he is truly an atheist, might he not be less dismissive of Stendhal, Russell and Hume and consider them instead as his leaders in wisdom? It seems not: it is doubt that galvanizes Wood, while mere disbelief (or mere belief, for that matter) seems beneath his notice. John Updike for instance, a Christian sensualist with a theology Wood deems "complacent," inevitably irks him.

> The enormous gap—in interest, substance, and turbulence—between Herman Melville and John Updike, both God-involved novelists, is one measure of our broken estate. Surely John Updike is one of the least tragic of major writers, and of all theological writers, one of the more complacent. It is hard to picture a moment of real anguish, or agony, in his work. . . . [L]et us examine his strange theological serenity, the stainless quality that ensures that his books never quite agitate us (or, or the other hand, never quite console us) as great works do. Updike is not, I think, a great writer, and the lacuna is not in the quality of the prose but in the risk of the thought. Updike's serenity and his deep indebtedness to the textures of the actual may flow from his own [Barthian] religious belief. . . . For him the world does indeed seem to exist as a divine visual gift, and as a consolation or reassurance, rather than as a proof.

It seems to me that Wood is right on every count; I find it impossible to argue with him. And yet, and yet . . . isn't this selfsame delivery of consolation one of the reasons we continue, over the decades, to read and enjoy Updike? To compare him with Melville, simply because both are "God-involved," is meaningless. Updike is nothing like Melville; as Wood points out, he is probably not really a great writer. Over the next fifty or hundred years his novels, as they lose their topicality, will lose much of their readership as well. Still, he is one of our era's very best, and the qualities that Wood refuses to value are the same qualities that make his work delightful and, yes, even important.

Another writer Wood finds distasteful is E.M. Forster. "Forster's writing is cozy, prissy-clever. . . . The cognitive neatness, the fondness for direct statement, the fat hand with theme and symbol, the knowingness," he insists, have had an unhealthy influence on English fiction ever since.

Again, one has to reply with a "Well yes, *but* . . . " Yes, Forster is cozy and prissy; *but* he is, in far greater measure, lucid, humane, enormously liberating; and those qualities, too, have had their fair share of influ-

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ence, whether Wood cares to admit it or not. One suspects that Updike, as a complacent believer, and Forster, as a cheerful nonbeliever, are simply antipathetic to Wood's essentially religious spirit. His review of Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater*—an unqualified rave—comes close to anatomizing the qualities he most values and respects in literature.

> Sabbath's grossness, his racist rants, will doubtless provoke the usual imprecations, but it should be clear that the novel's offense is not political but metaphysical. Sabbath's offenses are against life. . . . Roth is not simply delighting in his avoidance of correct thinking or "disciplined expression." He is blaspheming, with all the grandeur that blasphemy implies. *Sabbath's Theater* mounts an anti-theological theology. Blasphemy is more profound than rudeness, because it ascribes value to what is blasphemed. Sabbath's negative engagement with the world is a kind of homage to its cruel power.

Wood makes a strong case for his own demanding aesthetic. But too many works of real value fall outside of the narrow boundaries he has erected; a critic should think twice before chiding the near-great for not being great, taking Forster to task for not being Tolstoy, Updike for not being Melville. Forster and Updike are what they are: flawed, unique, irreplaceable. One senses, without being told, the disapproval that any number of equally irreplaceable writers would generate in Wood. He would probably dislike Shaw, for instance, for his didacticism and self-confidence; Samuel Butler for his crankiness; Anthony Powell for his mandarin chill.

The figure of Gustave Flaubert is central to Wood's theme of the broken estate, and Wood's essay on him, "Half Against Flaubert," is marvelous, possibly the collection's best. The influence Flaubert had and continues to have on the novel is tremendous, and as Wood demonstrates, not always benign.

> It is hard not to resent Flaubert for making fictional prose stylish—for making style a problem for the first time in fiction. After Flaubert, style is always mirrored, always self-conscious, always a trapped decision. Style became religious with Flaubert, at the same moment that religion became a kind of literary style, a poetry, with Ernest Renan. Flaubert himself admired Rabelais, Cervantes, and Molière as if they were beasts of mere instinct. "They are great . . . because they have no techniques." . . . He was imprisoned in scruple, and he imprisoned his successors in scruple. He is the novelist from whom the Modern, with all its narrow freedoms, flows.

He goes on to discuss the expansion of the novel in Flaubert's time and the way Flaubert, beyond all other writers, led it into a sort of impasse in which it still struggles for freedom today.

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> The novel was triumphant at the middle of the century, and there is a sense in which Melville, Flaubert, and Gogol, all of them writing roughly contemporaneously, were poets who wanted to make the novel a genre that could consume all others and then perform all their functions at once—a stomach of genres, digesting satire, poetry, epic, the historical novel, realism, and fable. . . . But under Flaubert the novel's great expansion was perhaps an expansion into limit. Flaubert was marched by his little army of ambitions into a war of literary possibilities, only to be overwhelmed by sheer option. The novel discovered all that it could do, all that it then had to do, and collapsed out of fatigue into *style*. . . . Style was a trapped decision for Flaubert, as it is for all his successors, because he, and we, are always in a relationship with style; indifference to style is no longer possible, and is converted into dilemma. . . . The plainest writers now become stylists too, of renunciation. Flaubert gave birth to Nabokov on one side, and to Hemingway on the other. In short, Flaubert made the novel a painterly activity, and perhaps in doing so he destined the novel to the danger of irrelevance.

It's true, and unusually well-said: our regrettable age of self-consciousness must indeed have been inaugurated by Flaubert. The magnificent uninhibitedness of Cervantes and Rabelais, whom Flaubert admired and envied, or of Boccaccio, or of Fielding, seems gone forever.

Flaubert, Wood argues, was a great writer *in spite of* the qualities for which he so painfully strove: his Godlike detachment, the discreet writing that refuses to comment upon itself, the fastidious distaste in which he held his characters. He was great because in the end his characters refused to let their author's surgical precisions kill them; they insisted, finally, upon their own humanity. "Emma begins to live. . . . Flaubert seems to forgive her for the tawdry escapism of her dreams and begins to sympathize with her. Something heroic stirs in the folds of her scanty soul."

Anton Chekhov provides Wood with a perfect foil for Flaubert. "There is a sense in which Chekhov—without of course meaning to, and in a very different aesthetic and political context—'solved' all the desperate literary dilemmas that rifled [*sic*?] Flaubert." Flaubert was only moved from dislike of his characters with difficulty and against his own judgment; Chekhov's stated philosophy—written to a friend—was "Love your characters—but not aloud!" Flaubert separated himself, the author, from his characters; Chekhov "sees the world not as a writer might see it but as one of his characters might." "If Flaubert's people are all mistakes," Wood writes, "Chekhov's, even the fools, are always forgiven. . . . Where Flaubert judges his characters' fantasies, Chekhov indulges them." Wood's essay on Chekhov, "What Chekhov Meant by Life," is another first-rate one, a worthy companion piece to "Half Against Flaubert."

Not all the essays approach this high level. "D.H. Lawrence's Occult-

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ism" is hyperbolic and over-the-top. "Jane Austen's Heroic Consciousness" is a commonplace piece of work; one gets the feeling that the homage Wood pays the author is more dutiful and conventional than spontaneous. His admiration for Virginia Woolf is real enough, but again his essay, "Virginia Woolf's Mysticism," offers nothing of great interest. He wastes a lot of space repeating the tired, over-rehearsed Woolfian lore that must by now be all too familiar to his readers, without ever challenging Woolf's own highly subjective—in fact unreliable—interpretations of her life. His comments on her critical writing are good; those on her fiction are not, particularly.

"George Steiner's Unreal Presence," however, a brutal and exactly to-the-point attack on that critic's pomposities, is quite perfect. Wood takes Steiner to task for the excesses of his prose: "its imprecisions and melodramas; the platoonlike massing of its adjectives, its cathedral hush around the great works." He mocks Steiner's "superstitious worship of 'greatness,' in which greatness is detached from its referent and has become a portable magic, like *feng shui*." And he exposes, finally, Steiner's moral irresponsibility and political ignorance. "Though he thinks he is opposing nihilism with faith, he is actually opposing it with nothing more than good taste."

Steiner has been given too much respect by his contemporaries, who have accepted, sheeplike, the author's inflated evaluations of his own opinions—not an uncommon error when it comes to writers and intellectuals. Another overrated figure is Thomas Pynchon, and Wood states with inspired clarity why this is so. "Readers of Pynchon," he writes, "often mistake bright lights for evidence of habitation." It is a truth of which our culture, bedazzled with excess, needs constantly to be reminded. After all, size, wordiness, allegory, allusion, are not in themselves positive goods; they are only as good as the ideas they serve. Wood ruthlessly exposes the void behind Pynchon's literary preening.

Julian Barnes gets a drubbing too, but for a different reason. "Barnes is rather celebrated," Wood writes, "for the fat and waxy health of his 'ideas.' But his fiction is addicted to fact. It proposes riddles and mysteries which then, in a quiet spirit of self-satisfaction, it solves." This leads Wood to one of the most pointed, and best expressed, passages of this volume.

> Great fiction appears to discover facts by giving us the impression that our reading of the text completes the bottom half of a discovery whose plaintive stalk the writer has merely uncovered. Fiction should seem to offer itself to the reader's completion, not to the writer's. This whisper of conspiracy is one of fiction's necessary beauties.

This, I would say, is true; true, that is, of *great* fiction. But not all fiction is great; not all fiction aspires to be great. Wood tends to be at his best when considering the heavy-hitters. When it comes to so-called minor fiction, he is a thought-provoking but unreliable guide.

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MARK JARMAN

Eyewitnesses of Majesty

MOSES, THE BIBLE'S FIRST PREACHER, bases two of his most famous sermons on the same text. Highly contrasting, they provide an idea of the range available in the pulpit. The first time he descends Mount Sinai, carrying stone tablets on which God has written with his own finger, Moses finds his people worshiping the golden calf. Furious, he breaks the tablets, then grinds the calf into powder and mixes the gold with water, which he makes his congregation drink. Then, he orders a militia of sword-bearing Levites to assault the miscreants; they kill some three thousand men. All of the literary value of this sermon exists after the fact, as history. It is the action that counts, and that action is Moses' commentary on his text, those broken tablets. The second time Moses descends Mount Sinai, again carrying stone tablets that God has written on, he finds his people well behaved and attentive, and he tells them what God has commanded. The second, more conventional sermon gains part of its credibility from the theatrics of the first. Moses conveys through words the desires of God, which include the Ten Commandments. His text is The Law. Homiletics, the art of preaching, which requires that a homily or sermon comment on a text from the Bible, derives from Moses' second sermon. But the first, entirely improvised as it is by Moses' sense of outrage and drama, plays an equally important part in the history of sermonizing, for it provides a dimension only an eyewitness can truly appreciate. In other words, Moses' two homilies demonstrate that the sermon is not only a literary production, but a performance.

American preachers have often cast their congregations as Israelites come to or preparing for a promised land, implying that the preachers, equipped with divinely inspired texts and commentary, see themselves as types of the prophet Moses. This appropriation of the Exodus story is evident in the nearly sixty sermons Michael Warner has gathered for a recent volume in The Library of America's valuable editions of American literature.[1] The powerful myth of America *as* a promised land extends from the sermons of the Puritans, sometimes delivered to the new arrivals in boats offshore, to the last sermon of Martin Luther King, Jr., who warned his congregation that, like Moses, he might only receive

[1] AMERICAN SERMONS: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr., ed. by *Michael Warner*. The Library of America. $40.00.

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a glimpse of their ultimate destination. The transition of the Exodus story from the possession of white Europeans to African slaves and their descendants is but one of the aspects of American intellectual history recorded in this collection of sermons from four centuries. Missing from all but a few of these texts, however, is a sense of how their preachers performed them.

In his useful, but rather short "Note on the Sermon Form," Warner explains that the sermon begins in America as a highly developed Puritan form employed "to educate hearers about Scripture." In England, Puritan liturgy favored preaching over ritual, and antagonists to this practice included Elizabeth I, who preferred her homilies "brief." The 20 or so Puritan sermons Warner has collected comprise over half of the volume's nearly 900 pages, and most, even some with the strongest emotional appeal, like Jonathan Edwards' famous "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," are rigorously intellectual and follow rules laid down in the late sixteenth century by one William Perkins in his book *The Art of Prophecying*. Warner lists the four requirements that Perkins makes of the Puritan preacher:

> "1. To reade the Text distinctly out of the Cannonicall Scriptures.
> 2. To give the sense and understanding of it being read, by the Scripture itself.
> 3. To collect a few and profitable points of doctrine out of the naturall sense.
> 4. To apply (if he have the gift) the doctrines rightly collected, to the life and manners of men in a simple and plaine speech."

Some of the Puritan preachers definitely did "have the gift." Thomas Hooker understood that nothing is less effective than "preaching to the choir." In a sermon published in 1656, nine years after his death, he states wisely, "General Truths generally do little good. That which is spoken to all, is spoken to none at al." He illustrates this general truth with a metaphor directly from the life of his times: "As the noise of a piece afar off makes the Fowl listen, but one scattered shot that fals upon the wing or leg makes them cry and stir." Nothing is quite like the moment when, listening with a kind of bland equanimity to a sermon, the congregant realizes the preacher is talking about him or her personally. Yet despite the use of metaphor, some Puritan preachers were capable of the driest rhetoric of St. Paul. John Cotton, in a sermon he preached shortly after his emigration to America in 1633, employs a figure than sounds like the drone of some oft-repeated old saw:

> Christ gave us our life, and he preserves it, wee cannot better explaine it then thus; A wind-mill moves not onely by the wind, but in the wind; so a water-mill hath its motion, not onely from the water, but in the water; so a Christian lives, as having his life from Christ, and in Christ, and further then Christ breathes and assists, he stirs not . . .

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Most of the Puritan sermons are carefully constructed arguments, bolstered by innumerable references to scripture and appeals to Reason, as John Donne understood the term, as God's "viceroy" to the human soul. One can imagine the original listeners attending or not, based on the circumstances. The urgent necessity for the Puritan pastors in the seventeenth century was to show their flocks how to live successfully in these new communities, which usually required a good Christian or Socialist approach to communal life, the kind of share and share alike demanded by living with hardships, in close quarters. What to do about the indigenous peoples was also important. In a sermon given at Plymouth in 1621, Robert Cushman calls the Indians, "helpless and idle," yet still deserving an evangelism by example, "which will preach louder to them, then if you could crie in their Barbarous language."

Actions should speak louder than words, at least the words of a "Barbarous language." The question remains how the long, often arid, occasionally brilliant texts of the Puritan sermons affected their listeners when preached. Surely it was a terrifying moment when in 1741, Jonathan Edwards, in his great and terrible description of "*everlasting* Wrath," stated:

> There is Reason to think, that there are many in this Congregation now hearing this Discourse, that will actually be the Subjects of this very Misery to all Eternity. We know not who they are, or in which Seats they sit, or what Thoughts they now have: it may be they are now at Ease, and hear all these Things without much Disturbance, and are now flattering themselves that they are not the Persons, promising themselves that they shall escape. If we knew that there was one Person, and but one, in the whole Congregation that was to be the Subject of this Misery, what an awful Thing would it be to think of! If we knew who it was, what an awful Sight would it be to see such a Person! How might all the rest of the Congregation lift up a lamentable and bitter Cry over him! But alass! Instead of one, how many is it likely will remember this Discourse in Hell?

How many, indeed. But we can only guess at the terror that question must have instilled, for it is as improbable to believe such a thing today as it is to acknowledge Cotton Mather's "science" in "The Wonders of the Invisible World," his discourse on "the Nature, the Number, and the Operations of the DEVILS," preached in 1692 during the height of the Salem witch trials. Mather, like Edwards, speaks with great intelligence out of a profound ignorance. One of the most interesting aspects of this collection of sermons is watching how subsequent American preachers, working for and against the Calvinist tradition, have either accommodated or refused to accommodate the increase of knowledge and the waning of superstition. In any case, the Puritans seem to have set the tone for all other American preachers that follow, one which they either echo or renounce.

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It would be wrong to say that the Puritans were literal-minded, but they did believe they were describing a world that existed materially as well as spiritually. Much of their advice to their congregations is a practical attempt to determine what kind of knowledge comes from God. Jonathan Edwards in "The Reality of Spiritual Light" posits a higher reality, which he insists it is "Reason's Work" to comprehend. For him it was "a Kind of Emanation of GOD's Beauty" and was "related to GOD as the Light is to the Sun." We can see pretty clearly the Neo-Platonism behind such thinking. We ought to recognize as well the down-to-earth American expectation of "those glorious Rewards that GOD has promised to them that obey him." The promise not only of salvation but of general well-being remains a strong element in American preaching, especially of the fundamental and evangelical variety. But where the Puritans based their reasoning on a Platonic reality, today's fundamentalists insist on taking literally all that is said in the Bible. Though it will sound condescending to say so, the Puritans believed as they did for want of greater knowledge. Today's fundamentalist preachers, who wish for much the same things for their congregations as their Puritan forebears, betray an intellectual dishonesty in their insistence on a literal interpretation of scripture—a literalness in this day and age that might have shocked Jonathan Edwards and his austere brethren.

The sectarian warfare in America's pulpits probably is of no interest to most of us. And yet revivals of the heated debate that went into the Scopes Monkey Trial grow from the same tension that begins to tighten before the revolutionary and paradigm-shattering discoveries of the nineteenth century. During the eighteenth century, as the Puritan mind is changed, a kind of anarchy ensues, although it would be preferable to think of it as healthy variety. There is the Berkeleyan idealism of Samuel Johnson, who stirred things up at Yale when he returned to the Anglican church. Preaching in 1747, he sounds like Montaigne when he reminds his hearers that "there are multitudes of other tribes and innumerable other creatures of the same intelligent active nature with us, many of whom may be vastly more perfect than we." But in contrast to this enlightened thinking, there is Devereux Jarratt, on the cusp of the nineteenth century, hectoring his congregation with, "Thus O sinners, you are cursed in the present time, and are treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath," etc. Only ardent love of Jesus can save the soul, according to Jarratt. His is the twenty-sixth sermon in the anthology, appearing over half the way through. A Virginian, he is also the first Southerner the anthology represents.

The nineteenth century explodes with voices contending for the American soul. It is among the sermons of this century, as well, that we begin to have a sense of performance, or at least public presentation, because a number of them exist as transcriptions of extemporized preaching. Quakers like John Comly and Unitarians like William Ellery Channing are eloquent in their repudiation of Calvinism. Comly's

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message that we dwell in "littleness and simplicity" and "do that which is good" pours refreshing cold water on the grandiose threats of Jonathan Edwards. Channing displays an intellectual capacity as great as any of the Puritans, arguing for a typically humanistic view of Christianity, which he calls a "spiritual system, intended to turn men's minds upon themselves . . . to establish them in an intimacy with their own souls." Emerson who is part of this spiritual change is represented by the sermon he gave when he resigned his pastorate at the Second Church of Boston in 1829, because he no longer believed that the Lord's Supper was meaningful and refused to take part in it. His argument, based on a very close reading of the scriptures, is curiously literal, but a reminder of how seriously preachers like himself took the reality of their belief. The nineteenth century divides deeply between those like Channing, Emerson, and the remarkable Octavius Brooks Frothingham who argues the illogic of a just God punishing anyone for eternity—preachers who appeal to the intelligence of their congregation, much as the Puritans did, and those like Dwight Lyman Moody, T. De Witt Talmage, and Sam P. Jones who stir the emotions by reminding their listeners that there is only one, fundamental way to salvation, which the Puritans also believed. This division continues into the twentieth century and exists today.

The early nineteenth century included a period known as the Second Great Awakening (the first having occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century, awakening the evangelical fervor of the Calvinists). During this period new sects arose, most notably the Latter Day Saints, led by Joseph Smith. His sermon, one of the transcriptions of an extemporaneous talk, was given by Smith in 1844, weeks before he was murdered by an anti-Mormon mob. It is fascinating to *listen* to the way he must have held his audience. Repeatedly focusing all attention on his authority, as one who has had some divine revelation, he vows to enlighten his congregation about the nature of God ("an exalted man"), and makes promises that must have captivated his listeners, even if now they sound like humbug.

> A question may be asked—"Will mothers have their children in eternity?" Yes! Yes! Mothers, you shall have your children; for they shall have eternal life, for their debt is paid. There is not damnation awaiting them for they are in the spirit. But as the child dies, so shall it rise from the dead, and be for ever living in the learning of God. It will never grow; it will still be the child, in the same precise form as it appeared before it died out of its mother's arms, but possessing all the intelligence of God.

The image is bizarre, to say the least. What the transcription catches in Smith's, as in the other extemporized sermons, is the excitement of the speaker as he begins to roll.

You can hear this excitement especially in the sermons of the African American preachers represented in the volume, starting with Absalom

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Jones, a former slave, whose "Thanksgiving Sermon," preached in 1808 on the occasion of the abolition of the African slave trade, includes a stretch of anaphora about God's intervention. The italics in the following passage are his.

> He *came down* into the United States, when they declared, in the constitution which they framed in 1788, that the trade in our African fellow-men, should cease in the year 1808. He *came down* into the British Parliament, when they passed a law to put an end to the same iniquitous trade in May, 1807. He *came down* into the Congress of the United States, the last winter, when they passed a similar law, the operation of which commences on this happy day.

Similarly, the transcription of Brother Carper's "The Shadow of a Great Rock," preached in 1850, captures the moment when the preacher makes his allegorical figure plain, albeit in a crude recording of his black dialect.

> Dat rock am Christ; dem winds be de wrath ob God rabealed aginst de children ob disobedience. Dem that he sabed be dem dat hab fled to de refuge, to de hope set before dem in Christ Jesus de Lord. De desert am de vast howling wilderness ob dis world, where dare be so little ob lub, and so much of hate; so little ob sincerity, and so much ob hypocrisy; so little ob good, and so much ob sin; so little ob heben and so much ob hell.

Needless to say, repetition and parallelism are techniques that contribute to a sermon's emotional appeal. If we remember the use Walt Whitman made of them, we may see him as a great secular preacher in this mode. Such repetition marks the most famous passages of the greatest American preacher of the twentieth century, Martin Luther King, Jr., who is represented in the anthology by two sermons. Arguing from St. Paul's advice that Christians "Be not conformed to this world," in his sermon "Transformed Nonconformist," King employs a powerful anaphoric series to lead his listeners to understand "the ugliness of our stale conformity."

> When an affluent society would coax us to believe that happiness consists in the size of our automobiles . . .
>
> When we would yield to the temptation of a world rife with sexual promiscuity and gone wild with a philosophy of self-expression . . .
>
> When we refuse to suffer for righteousness and choose to follow the path of comfort . . .
>
> When in our spiritual pride we boast of having reached the peak of moral excellence . . .
>
> When we, through compassionless detachment and arrogant individualism, fail to respond to the needs of the underprivileged . . .

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> When we allow the spark of revenge in our souls to flame up in hate toward our enemies . . .

He employs the same technique for gruesomely humorous effect in his final sermon, preached in Memphis the night before he was assassinated. Recalling an attempt on his life in the late fifties, when he was stabbed at a book-signing, he notes that if he had sneezed, the blade would have punctured his aorta and he would have died. "If I had sneezed," he repeats, a number of significant events in the Civil Rights movement would have occurred without him. One can imagine how true and funny it was that night, to listen to the great preacher make light of his own mortality. Yet it is this sermon that ends with his image of himself as Moses, allowed to see the promised land but not allowed to make it there.

A sermon gives its listeners a way to think about God's will. That is why the sermon can be such a powerful medium for inspiring social and political action. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sermons are memorable, in part, for this reason. Others from the twentieth century include Abraham Joshua Heschel's "What We Might Do Together," in which he imagines Jews and Christians working "for peace in Vietnam, for racial justice in our own land," and Reinhold Niebuhr's stoic response to the Cold War, "The Providence of God," in which he argues for the "impartial character of God's love." The nineteenth century, a great age of reform, includes sermons by Lucretia Mott, arguing for temperance and women's suffrage in her sermon "Abuses and Uses of the Bible," by Theodore Parker, speaking against the Mexican War, and by Henry Ward Beecher, making it clear that America's great sin is slavery. Yet the sermon as political statement precedes even these in the American pulpit. Warner has included Jonathan Mayhew's complexly argued 1750 sermon "Concerning Unlimited Submission," in which he makes a case one hundred years after the English Civil War for deposing Charles I and subtly draws a parallel between tyranny then and tyranny in the present day. Twenty years later, Samuel Cooke, speaking three months after the Boston Massacre, argues that God and Christ should be the models for all enlightened leadership and reminds his listeners that their claims against being overly taxed are not novel American grievances but are founded on their rights as "British subjects." Because preachers are, to adapt a phrase from Jonathan Edwards, "Eyewitnesses of Glory," when they choose to speak out on social and political issues, they are at their most controversial. Who is to say which political party God supports? The arguments for and against political preaching are ongoing. The risk with such preaching is that only the converted are listening.

I want to end on a personal note. As the son and grandson of preachers, I grew up listening to a sermon every Sunday, and even today attend church in part to hear good preaching. Passionate or dispassionate, a good preacher conveys a message about what God wants from us

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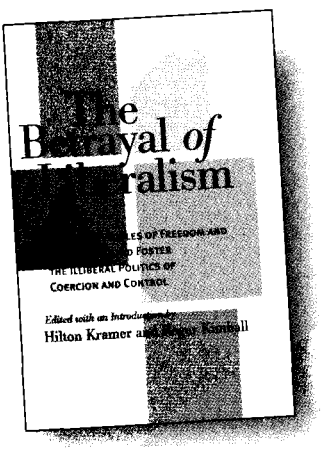
and for our lives. I have had the experience of listening complacently to general truths that I did not think applied especially to me and I have had the experience of hearing things I would rather not have heard, because they applied to me all too obviously. Some preachers are so passionately demonstrative in the pulpit, it is better to sit near the back of the sanctuary. Others preach in such an understated way, sitting close allows you to catch physical nuances you would miss otherwise. Good preaching is like good theater. If you are in the congregation, listening to a good preacher, you willingly suspend disbelief. And when that happens, lo and behold, belief itself can surprise you.



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ROBERT McDOWELL

Father Walt and the Divine Average

LIKE THE BEST AMERICAN POETRY, which is always regional in character, the best biographies—Gene Fowler's *Good Night, Sweet Prince* and Carlos Baker's *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* come to mind—succeed by taking us into a fully realized, meticulously described, vanished world. In that world, the reader's desire to be the fly on the wall, the ear at the door, the voyeur peering through the window from the branches of a nearby tree, is realized. At the same time all biographies, at some level, awaken our craving for gossip, our need to know the stories of others, especially the facts that may have been hidden from public view. Finally, the best biographies of literary figures also take us deeper into the working process of the main subject.

On most of these counts, Jerome Loving's *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*[1] is a valuable biography and a good read. That is no small accomplishment given the number of books available on America's Father-Poet. Loving generously credits his predecessors throughout his own long book, and clearly defines their joint responsibilities: "The job of the critical biographer . . . is to reconfirm or correct the facts of the life, discover new ones, and reconsider the biographical evidence so that we can continue to study and appreciate this great poet as accurately as possible in the twenty-first century."

Loving's efforts are also corrective in intention as he strives to restore the facts of Whitman's life, which "have been Freudianized and historicized to fit current political and literary ideologies."

This last is a particularly admirable and necessary goal. In an age in which popular movie stars sell products on television decades after their deaths (the beer commercial, not the work of art, anoints one with immortality), and Hemingway publishes a "new" novel almost fifty years after killing himself, it is harder than ever to see with clear eyes any subject of intense interest, let alone the world that made him or her. So Loving is at his most compelling, not when he ponders the poet's sex life, or Whitman's attitudes towards slavery and the temperance movement, but in his descriptions of mid-nineteenth-century Manhattan and New Orleans, the Long Island countryside, and the Civil War hospitals and battlefields. He is at his best describing Whitman's long daily walks around Washington Square during which, with a journalist's knack for observation, he almost certainly began to develop his concept of the

[1] WALT WHITMAN: The Song of Himself, by *Jerome Loving*. The University of California Press. $35.00.

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"divine average." In a similar, interesting aside, Loving suggests that "it may have been in New York boarding houses that the future poet first came upon the method of his famous catalog to celebrate the strength of American democracy and diversity." He is most useful describing the detour in Whitman's development prompted by a massive fire that destroyed Wall Street and many small businesses (and drove the poet to teaching on Long Island), or the often frightening effects of alcohol on mid-nineteenth-century Americans, or in describing the common American school of the period.

"Schoolhouses were primitive one-room affairs," Loving writes, "heated with a stove. Because matches had yet to be invented, the teacher sent students 'next door' for 'a brand of fire to kindle with.' Teachers used large, 13-inch by 16-inch sheets of paper, which they had to fold and line themselves, and pens were made of goose quills, which they had to sharpen and split." It is deliciously jarring to be reminded, in the course of a sweeping narrative, that in America, where we are used to having everything, once we did not even have matches, and teachers had to line the lesson paper and sharpen pens themselves.

Attention to detail of this kind evokes that vanished world we seek, and makes it possible for Loving to spring from facts to nimble speculation, as in his conclusion about Whitman's five-year stint (1836–1841) as a teacher at eight Long Island district schools: "It is no wonder that Whitman, like Melville and others such as Emerson and Thoreau, who also taught when no other employment was available, did not make teaching his career and in fact taught only intermittently. It was not enviable employment . . . "

Conclusions like this one are the author's great delight. Another good example of this method concerns the inclusion, in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass,* of an attitude that celebrates the equality of men and women, and the primacy of women as mothers, as originators; Loving points out that "the poet fell in with the company of proto-feminists and utopianists" in the mid-fifties, and that women like Abby Price played major roles in educating Whitman. *Walt Whitman* is well worth reading just for discoveries such as these.

Loving begins his story of Whitman's life late in 1862, when the poet traveled to Virginia to find his wounded brother, George (of the 51st New York Volunteers). Biographers and readers agree that the Civil War created a defining period in the poet's life, the one we are most familiar with, and so it is appropriate that this biography begin there. Loving deftly launches, from the platform of one brother desperately looking for another, into an examination of Whitman's relationships, the clannish closeness of the big family, the individuality of the poet's siblings. The exploration winds easily back to Whitman's childhood, to the early Long Island years where the future poet developed his affinity for the natural world, and to Brooklyn, where his formal schooling took place.

Loving moves quickly through the facts of employment following the

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conclusion of the poet's formal education at age eleven, but rightly spends much time on Whitman's years in journalism as a printer's apprentice and reporter. "Brooklyn and newspaper work," Loving asserts, "were this poet's university." Appropriately, Whitman is placed in a club of American writers who "met their craft and art in a printing office and the editorial parlors of a newspaper: Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway." Loving, writing about this period alone, gives most readers a highly charged, intimate understanding of Whitman's "inbred sympathy for the average person, for the working poor . . . "

Loving is also much concerned with the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson on Whitman, and their eventual, distant relationship. The biographer makes much of a pivotal moment in Whitman's poetic development. The moment occurred in 1842 (probably the year in which Whitman first read Emerson), when Whitman attended Emerson's lecture in New York. There he discovered a philosophical call-to-arms to which, in poetry, he could respond. Later, Loving writes, "He [Whitman] democratized the Emersonian essay by giving the 'emblem of nature' a viable (and virile) body." This claim fairly fits the facts.

But Loving, for all his success, does not always hit the mark (and one may forgive him, given the scope of his undertaking). Two examples, one especially, cannot go unmentioned by this reviewer. At one point, Loving refers to George McClellan as "Lincoln's first top general." No. Lincoln's first top general was my great-great-grandfather, Irvin McDowell, who suffered the misfortune of losing the battle of Bull Run. It has always been an irritating family mystery that General McClellan, known only for the zeal with which he avoided battle, should be better remembered.

A far more serious misunderstanding occurs when Loving expresses his view of the birth of *vers libre*. Echoing the complaint of contemporary factions that oppose traditional form in poetry, Loving apparently equates free verse with democratic ideals and sees form as an effete expression of class privilege. Indeed, one might think here that one was reading the shrill Diane Wakoski on the New Formalists rather than Jerome Loving on Walt Whitman. Loving misses many of the striking formal elements in Whitman's poetry (what Annie Finch would call the ghost of meters), and, most important, misses the fact that *Leaves of Grass* is, perhaps above all else, a poetry owing everything to inspired grammar. When Loving sticks to the man and his movements, his time, events, and country, he is pleasing, thorough, and convincing; when trying to unlock the secrets of the poetry, he is less so.

Even so, he does effectively describe the long years (1830s–1840s) of poetry apprenticeship in which poems groped for a style, and new subjects. It is poignant to meet Whitman's fear that he has grown stale, a tired moralist, and it is exciting, every now and then, to read a part of a poem that bristles with the inspired energy of the mature style to come.

He also writes convincingly about the importance of opera in Whit-

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man's work: "It is because of Italian opera that *Leaves of Grass* must be read aloud to appreciate its full power. Its musical influence is not merely a matter of 'sound-and-sense' such as William Wordsworth created in *The Solitary Reaper*. . . Rather, the Solitary Singer—or Paumanok—sought an effect deeper and earthier (than even that of Wordsworth's peasants). His revolutionary verse pursued not merely description, but emotion. Opera awoke in Whitman the beauty of life."

These processes of becoming make the best parts of this book worth reading and re-reading. It is impossible for a biographer to remain aloof where his subject is concerned, and it becomes clear to this reader that Loving cherishes most the young Walt Whitman, the journalist-democrat and poet-to-be, the American wanderer in search of a new expression and original characters. It's clear that Loving's imagination is fired most by images of the country all new and rough, and far from the corporate sameness of our own time. The latter part of *Walt Whitman*, those pages dutifully covering the poet's long illness, final appearances and death, and those dealing with his literary protectors and their efforts (with his considerable guidance) to polish and perpetuate his poetic reputation, seem rather flat in tone and skimpy in insight when compared to the sections covering earlier years. Still, Loving gets right the most vital points about Walt Whitman.

The fact, as one British reviewer put it, that "the most prudish country" would produce a major poet like Walt Whitman, is more remarkable than we realize, even today. So many second-tier *liberators* have stormed through American poetry in this century that Whitman's primacy is, at times, obscured by their books and chatter.

One must remember, or be reminded of the fact, that Whitman launched his poems without the benefit or comfort of a precursor. It is practically inconceivable now, for writers as well as casual readers, to guess at Whitman's loneliness and bravery in composing and publishing *Leaves of Grass*. Emerson's famous letter ("I greet you at the beginning of a great career") offered sympathy, spiritual sustenance, and publicity for later editions and projects, but the poet could not have known that in the early days of his first edition. What happened was nothing less than a miracle of character—a fledgling nation, in the process of making up its own character, created the poet's character. In his great poems, he would evoke and give voice to the nation's conscience. No writer can serve a more important agenda. It was Sappho's calling, and Homer's, and John Milton's. It was Walt Whitman's calling, too. "*Leaves of Grass*," Loving writes, "is conspicuous, of course, for its first-and-second-person points of view, but Whitman as both a poet and a journalist had to take himself out of the first person in order to find his originality as an American poet, to discover the 'I' that could celebrate *itself* with the assurance of another's point of view."

Jerome Loving understands and respects this first fact about Whitman. Because he makes this miracle more accessible, more immediate, we respect and admire him, too.

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ROBERT PHILLIPS

Utterly Unlike

"THE FIRST THING THAT STRIKES A READER about the best American poets is how utterly unlike each other they are," W.H. Auden said in his introduction to *The Criterion Book of Modern American Verse.* While written in 1956, his observation holds true today. Where else in the world would one find poets so disparate as Mary Jo Salter, Rita Dove, and Karen Swenson; or Michael Van Walleghen, Philip Booth, Philip Levine and Robert Bly? Auden pointed out that "the danger for the American poet is not of writing like everybody else but of crankiness and a parody of his own manner." It is a danger that not all manage to avoid.

Fortunately, Mary Jo Salter has not succumbed to such temptation. *A Kiss in Space*[1] is her fourth collection, and were her style and manner to set in cement, it would have by now. It is easy to praise the polish and control of these poems, from her subtle sense of rhyme (pairing "Alps" with "helps" and "end" with "hand"), to her mastery of the villanelle ("Video Blues") to her success with a shaped poem ("A Kiss in Space"). She was after all a student of the punctilious Elizabeth Bishop. But in the brief space given here, I'd like to take note of her range. While many poets are "merely" mental travellers, such as Blake and Dickinson, Salter has been an active traveller. She lived for several years in Kyoto, then in Rome, London, Reykjavík, and Paris. She has written poems set in those cities, as well as Cambridge, Rocky Harbour, Newfoundland, Hiroshima, the outback of Australia, and Chernobyl. Nor is her range limited, or should I say unlimited, to geography. Her cast of characters includes the historical (Alexander Graham Bell, Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller, President James A. Garfield, Charles Sturt, Myrna Loy, astronauts Norman Thabard and Yelenda Kondakova) with the fictional (Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Watson, Moriarity). Her subjects range from the domestic ("A Robin's Nest," "Au Pair") to the tragic ("The Seven Weepers"). And as always in her collections, the book is shaped, not just flung together. It begins with an exhilarating evocation of an early hot-air balloon trip over Chartres, and concludes with an account of a Russian cosmonaut welcoming an American onto the *Mir* space station. The collection also has a centerpiece, "Alternating Currents," an ambitious, four-part poem about communication and perception. Throughout Salter shows wit, as when she alters a familiar line ("Hers is a fate that launched a ship") and

[1] A KISS IN SPACE, by *Mary Jo Salter.* Alfred A. Knopf. $22.00.

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a wonderful eye: a nursing joey's head and forearms are buried deep in the mother kangaroo's pouch,

> like a woman
> rummaging in her purse for something
> nobody else can touch.

Mary Jo Salter is a refreshing and highly accomplished poet.

To go from the poetry of Salter to that of Michael Van Walleghen is to make a violent adjustment, their work is so dissimilar.[2] Whereas her verse sometimes is formal, with end or internal rhymes, his work invariably is unrhymed free verse. His favorite form is to alternate tercets with couplets. While her work is inspired by the worlds of opera, paintings, film, travel and foreign culture, his is firmly rooted in the Detroit of his youth and the east-central Illinois of his adulthood. There is a difference in social class on display: the narrator of Salter's hot-air balloon poem clearly is upper-class, from her diction to her champagne, while the characters of Van Walleghen's imagination inhabit a landscape of lube pits, coal bins, broken pallets, dollies and trailer courts.

It's more than a difference between a feminine versus a masculine sensibility. There's a great contrariety in their regard for precision. With Bishop-like detail she tells us exactly what something looks like—hail, for example, "fell out of the sky and hopped / Like popcorn in the pan." He, on the other hand, writes with a maddening disregard for factuality. One poem begins, "When I was about ten"; another describes a vacation cottage as having "No running water, no electricity, and no gas either that I remember"; and yet another states, "We have come to gather / firewood, I think . . . or maybe / berries of some kind." About ten? That I remember? Firewood, I think . . . or maybe berries? Instead of selecting telling details, instead of using the best words in the best order, many of these poems read like random jottings, notes toward the writing of a future poem. His adjectives and verbs most often are the expected ones, keeping an eye "glued" to a hole, "teetering on the brink of sleep."

Another problem is diction. Van Walleghen writes in pared-down Americanese, in the manner of William Carlos Williams. Fine. But then he'll throw in words like "aurochs," "dedritic," and "paleoanthropologist" that suddenly call attention to themselves and destroy the texture of a line.

This is not to say there are no good poems here. Some childhood memories, "The Elephant in Winter" and "Cuckoo," a poem about a tornado titled "Fright Train," and poems about an ill and suicidal brother are especially moving. I wish the language were more careful and specific throughout.

Similarities exist between Van Walleghen and Philip Levine. There is

[2] THE LAST NEANDERTHAL, by *Michael Van Walleghen.* University of Pittsburgh Press. $12.95p.

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the shared Detroit cityscape, blue collar existence, and guilt over a brother. But Levine began as somewhat of a formalist, and his work is more various, both in form and subjects. He has written of California, the Middle West, Spain, and points between, as well as a country of memory. His subjects include dreaming in Swedish, Hell's Angels, the trumpeter Clifford Brown, the Spanish Civil War, and the torture of Algerian prisoners. Many of his best poems are explicitly religious and explore his Jewish roots. Levine also has translated poems of Gloria Fuertes and Jaime Sabines. In short, there are more strings on his lyre than on Van Walleghen's.

His new book, *The Mercy*,[3] is not his best single collection, but the quality is very high. It deserves a place on the same shelf with *Ashes*, *The Names of the Lost*, and *The Simple Truth*. Once again Levine's sense of place plays a vital role, from Mud Lane in industrial Detroit to the steerage hold of the ship that took his mother to Ellis Island. The result should be dreary, but it is not. He responds equally to the beauties as well as the horrors of the world: the sounds of anvils striking iron inside are counter-pointed outside by horse chestnuts, "with blooms / as full as peonies." The book is filled not only with assembly lines and boxcars coupling, but roses, dahlias, milkweed and iris, all blooming like hope within the human heart. He alleviates the horrific with scents as well as sights—the odor of mint, apples, and asters permeates the darkness.

Everywhere Levine writes with authority, the voice of a poet who knows just what he's doing ("This is not / a photograph, it is a moment / in the daily life of the world. / A moment that will pass into / the unwritten biography / of your city or my city / unless it is frozen in the fine print / of our eyes"). His sense of language has never been stronger, positing effects such as "leaves turning / silver as the land wind shivers them." The enjambment is admirable, with the leaves first turning, then immediately turning silver. And it takes a fine ear to risk "silver" and "shiver" in the same line. The poems often end with a Rilkean thrust, one in direct opposition to Rilke's famous dictum: "It's never too late, is it, to lose your life." Elsewhere he concludes, "How did I miss / what was to come? It was all there in the rain," and, "We / are one / sharing whatever / you are as blindness descends." Levine achieves these little epiphanies with ease, without force, and the result is a book full of grace and illuminations. In his seventies, Levine is writing at the height of his power.

To read Robert Bly's volume of new and selected poems chronologically, from beginning to end, is a disheartening experience.[4] One wants our poets to get better and better, or at least remain as good as they were, and some do. Think of Hardy and Yeats. Think of Robert Penn Warren and Stanley Kunitz. But to revisit Bly's early poems of the 1950s

[3] THE MERCY, by *Philip Levine*. Alfred A. Knopf. $22.00.

[4] EATING THE HONEY OF WORDS: New and Selected Poems, by *Robert Bly*. Harper-Flamingo. $25.00.

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and to juxtapose them with the latest from the 1990s is to compare the sublime with the silly. Perhaps Bly simply has been too busy to practice his craft adequately. All those readings wearing a serape. All those translations. All those anthologies. All those protests against the Vietnam War. Founding the Men's Movement. Writing a bestseller, *Iron John.* Whatever the reason, the Muse does not seem to have been in attendance lately.

Which is a pity. Few Postmodern American poets are as versatile. His early lyrics evoke the ancient Chinese poets in their sparseness and luminosity:

> The grass is half-covered with snow.
> It was the sort of snowfall that starts in late afternoon,
> And now the little houses of the grass are growing dark.

How fine, how unexpected, are those "little houses of the grass."

Other work seemed fashioned after the twentieth-century Spanish surrealists. In his essays as well as in his poetry he urged us to explore the unknown and the irrational, to move ever inward:

> Inside the veins there are navies setting forth,
> Tiny explosions and the water lines,
> And seagulls weaving in the wind of the salty blood . . .

Bly became a master of the brief poem of only four to six lines, such as "Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter," "Watering the Horse," and "Taking the Hands." He also, together with James Wright, was one of the writers most influential in bringing the prose poem to prominence in this country. A good number are reprinted here, including the admirable "Looking at a Dead Wren in My Hand," which concludes, "Your tail feathers open like a picket fence, and your bill is brown, with the sorrow of a rabbi whose daughter has married an athlete. The black spot on your head is your own mourning cap."

I'm sorry to report that Bly, like John Crowe Ransom, Marianne Moore, and W. H. Auden before him, has not resisted late tinkering with earlier poems. For instance, the prose poem "Visiting Emily Dickinson's Grave with Robert Francis," ends with, "For this I have abandoned all my other lives." The 1981 version, from *The Man in the Black Coat Turns*, has a completely different (and less confusing) ending. It also begins with the second sentence of the revised version, not the prosaic stage-setter Bly now has tacked on: "Robert Francis has moved, since his stroke, into town, and he takes me to the cemetery." These are not improvements.

The sensibility that did such tampering with that poem is the same that wrote a section of the newest ones. The subject matter is sometimes embarrassing ("Wanting More Applause at a Conference"), the conceits laughable (Milton was "a dear elephant seal always / Longing for Virgil's rock"), the writing simplistic to the point of being just plain simple ("We

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say to / the world: 'Let's go / To your place.' The world / Says, 'Okay' ").

I suggested the poet may have been too engaged in other endeavors. But perhaps there's another reason for such atrophy. One group is called "A Week of Poems at Bennington." Could anyone write seven publishable poems in a week while, presumably, teaching at a writers' conference or college?

It is no crime that Bly's late work is not his best. Think of the falling off in the last work of Delmore Schwartz, James Dickey, and Denise Levertov, to name but three. There are enough wonderful poems and prose poems in the first half of this 270-page compilation to make us glad for its existence.

"I feel somewhat ridiculous about attempting to introduce this well-established poet to readers," M.L. Rosenthal wrote when he reviewed the *Collected Poems* of Horace Gregory in 1964. Yet Philip Booth today, at the age of seventy-four, with ten books of poetry and a collection of prose behind him, may still be in the predicament of Gregory and need introducing to some. While many poets know his work, I know of no poet of comparable distinction who is less known by the general reader. He is not represented in Ellmann and O'Clair's *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, McClatchy's *Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, Poulin's *Contemporary American Poetry*, or Vendler's *Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, to name just four. He is not a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, nor is he a Chancellor of the newly-expanded and politically-corrected Academy of American Poets. He has not yet won a National Book Award or a Pulitzer. Yet his work is of high distinction, he is a survivor, and he has had the good fortune to have the same publisher for all his books ever since Malcolm Cowley edited his first, *Letter from a Distant Land*, in 1957. (It was the 1956 Lamont Poetry Selection, chosen by no less than Louise Bogan, John Holmes, Rolfe Humphries, May Sarton, and Richard Wilbur.)

How does such neglect occur? Perhaps because Booth belongs to no clique, school or movement. He always has been his own man. Geographically remote, he lives in Maine in the house that has belonged to his family for five generations. You will not find him at Manhattan cocktail parties, or giving many poetry readings for that matter. No one has proclaimed his work part of The Western Canon. Booth quietly dedicates his life to his poetry, his family and, until his retirement, to the teaching of poetry. His work may have been considered "regional" by some, since he writes most often of New England people, places and things. He literally sat at the feet of Robert Frost as a student. When he receives a prize—and there have been a number—plus numerous grants and translations into five languages—he receives less hoopla than some others do.

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This edition of new and selected poems may make the difference.[5] It spans mid-century to the millennium. And I'm happy to announce the most recent poems are fresh and permanent additions to the body of his work. When I think of a Philip Booth poem, I think of his voice—understated, precise, delighting in the naming of things, a touch of humor often just behind a statement. Then I think of his line breaks, often surprising in their enjambment. As distinctive as his line breaks are his line-lengths—often very short. (I once accused him of writing such short lines because *The New Yorker* pays poets by the line. Unfair. If his lines are short, it is because it feels right for that particular poem, that particular emotion. He once wrote, "A line is the poet's spring-board: a recurrent chance to balance, spring, play Icarus, to enter the same old pool in a hundred new ways." No wonder he has no patience for the prose poem boys.) Then there is his penchant for terms of venery and collective nouns: "a caucus of crows," "a glory of mountains." His gratifying language is not limited to nouns—look at the verb in "snow tires snuffling up Main Street."

For one not yet acquainted with Booth, *Lifelines* is a dandy place to start. His selection from previous books is sound and representative, including "First Lesson," "Letter from a Distant Land," "Was a Man," "Lives," and "This Day After Yesterday." The seventeen new poems, written since 1994, are autumnal—mellow, accepting changes in the world and in the body. Visiting a woods, the poet realizes he's older than all but the tallest stands. More than once there is a struck note of reverence. As the poet names the blooming trees, "I let my head bow as I name them"; in another poem, observing trees from the interior of a church, "we let our eyes fill and be lifted." The longest poem concerns a rural mailman who suffers a blackout and is hospitalized. From his hospital bed he ponders the formation of the continent, its population by creatures:

> Merged out of chaos
> through hospital glass,
> he wonders clearly
> how creatures began
> to approach, or re-
> proach, who we have
> seemed to become.

In speaking of Booth's career, I have neglected to discuss the early work in this book. I'll end by quoting what Rosenthal said of Horace Gregory in the review which began this discussion: "The important thing is that a fine, sensitive, original voice, a spirit at once generous and fastidious, sophisticated and energetic, has long been among us, and

[5] LIFELINES: Selected Poems 1950–1999, by *Philip Booth.* Viking Press. $27.95.

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that we now have the opportunity to read in a single volume one of the most interesting bodies of poems to be made available to us in some years." I couldn't have said it better. Incidentally, Gregory's *Collected Poems* won him the Bollingen Prize the next year.

The last word in the first line of the first poem in Karen Swenson's large new and selected volume is "napalm." The first word in the second line of the second poem is "heroin," and the fourth poem alludes to Dresden.[6] How my heart sank when I saw that. Here, I thought, we have a poet who is going to preach against war and drugs and God knows what else.

But her work isn't like that at all. If Swenson mentions napalm or drugs, it's because she is a poet who is deeply engaged with the world and her times. But she never ascends the soapbox, never attempts to convert you to her point of view. Which would have been tempting, for sure, in the poems from her third book of poetry, *The Lady in Bangkok*, from which she reprints here 38 of the original 48 poems. These poems are all set in Southeast Asia, and deal with such subjects as American guilt, avarice, child prostitution and war atrocities. Yet rather than take sides, Swenson finds in such situations a common bond of humanity which links all humans one to another. She also depicts painfully the loneliness she, as an American, experienced once having visited lands where she'd dreamed of travelling.

As rich in detail as these Southeast Asian poems are, they are not among my favorites. I prefer her poems, early and late, which deal with her family—family of birth, and family of her making—and her native city of New York. Again loneliness is an overpowering emotion, as she writes of separation and divorce. And again she holds her emotions in check with careful diction and hard imagery. One poem, addressed to a plain woman, begins,

> We are almost all homely,
> beauty being rare as a round stone . . .

It concludes,

> And don't mind Helen with Grecian ships,
> that is the male's most fervent legend,
> told by a wanderer totally blind.

Only occasionally does she overwrite. ("Across a red scorch of mountains / she shattered on the pavement," and "The screen door behind me screams / its spring and slams.")

Throughout her imagery is original. Her version of Ophelia drowns in the attic. A woman's smile is described as being "like a torn billboard."

[6] A DAUGHTER'S LATITUDE: New & Selected Poems, by *Karen Swenson.* Copper Canyon Press. $16.00p.

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Barberries spatter "red as a smashed Christmas ball." The Colosseum has an "ancient malocclused bite." Often Swenson finds precisely the correct image to convey her emotions, as when she declares, "Like a Henry Moore statue / I've a zero in my middle." She then extends the conceit for twenty-four more lines.

Often entire poems progress from line to line with a sense of inevitability, as in "Love in Black and White," "The Chinese Laundryman," "Billy," "Moving," "The Saga of the Small-Breasted Woman," "Spring's Nebraska," "Signature of Love," "Androgyny," "Playing Someone Else's Piano," "The Ice-Cream Sandwich," and "The Song of the Mad Woman's Son." That's a long list of poems. If a good poet, in the oft-quoted remark by Randall Jarrell, is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times, Karen Swenson seems to have been struck with at least as much frequency, and her big collection (256 pages) reveals her to be a poet to whom attention must be paid.

Something has happened to the poetry of Rita Dove—and it's not good. Her early work showed genuine promise, as in the memorable "Parsley," an historical poem based on an appalling incident in the lives of Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic which took place in 1937. In this poem Dove distanced herself from the material; there is no "Rita Dove" speaking. She does not become a spokesperson for African Americans. Rather, the Dominicans stood for all oppressed individuals. And the poem is further distanced from the confessional and the colloquial by being cast into two sections, one having pretensions toward being a villanelle, the other a nonce sestina. The poems of her third book, *Thomas and Beulah*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1986, are less formal, but the sections have a sparseness and objectivity of snapshots.

These qualities are lacking in *On the Bus With Rosa Parks*.[7] Helen Vendler, who probably has written more about Dove than anyone (an essay in *The Music of What Happens*, two essays in *Soul Says*, and a quarter of the book *The Given and the Made*), praised her poems for exhibiting "the thrift that Yeats called the sign of a perfected manner." It will be interesting to see if Ms. Vendler can discover such thrift and perfection in this latest volume.

First, the poems need editing. One, under the heading of "Cameos," begins, "Joe ain't studying *nobody*. . ." We assume we are within the universe of the colloquial and the not well-educated, with that "ain't" and "nobody" in one sentence. Yet the narrator proceeds to speak of Joe "in parkbench celibacy, in apostolic factory rote, in guilt (the brief / astonishment of memory) . . ." Did we just shift into a total, other voice and level of diction, or what? In another "Cameo" a stanza reads,

[7] ON THE BUS WITH ROSA PARKS, by *Rita Dove*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. $21.00.

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While serving in Rangoon, Maurice observed Burmese village life, its customs and festivals, the elaborate traditional dramas played by traveling bands of actors, He had his horoscope drawn on a palm leaf by one of the last survivors of the royal astrologers of the court of Mandalay. But, by the late twenties he was becoming very unpopular with his superiors. As Magistrate in Rangoon he passed the same sentence, for instance, on a European as would have been inflicted on a Burmese. And, he became far more friendly with the prominent Burmese and Chinese residents of Rangoon than social custom allowed. Although these activities earned him a special place in popular opinion, they resulted in his falling into official disfavor. His next posting was therefore to the obscure port of Mergui. Yet it was there that he finally was able to embark on his true vocation as a writer as he amassed volumes of information about the local histories. In 1936, he left the civil service, and Burma, to write. By the end of his life he had written over twenty, thoroughly fascinating historical books.

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He knows what gin is made from—
berries blue. He knows
that Jesus Saves. (His father
calls it Bitches' tea.)

I suppose the "it" in the last line refers to "gin," though the non sequiter about Jesus saving has destroyed any grammatical connection. Elsewhere, imagery is lame ("Gone, just like the wind"—as if Margaret Mitchell hadn't put her name on that one.) Some poems go on two lines too long ("For Sophie, Who'll Be in First Grade in the Year 2000"), or don't conclude but simply end ("Sit Back, Relax").

While there are a few good poems (the allegorical "The Camel Comes to Us from the Barbarians," "Götterdammerung," and "Ghost Walk"), most simply are feeble. William Logan has beaten me to a discussion of the singular awfulness of "The First Book" (see *The New Criterion*, June 1999). One can only conjecture what has gone wrong. Dove seems to publish her collections about three years apart. Allowing about a year for book production, that means she's producing a full-length manuscript every two years. Perhaps that isn't long enough? Or perhaps, as I conjecture about Bly, her public appearances have gotten in the way of what she appears in public for. (She's accepted sixteen honorary doctorates so far.) This collection's dust jacket copy uses the adjectives "dazzling," "brilliant," "electrifying," and "infinitely various." Would that it were so. But it can be said that, from the title of her book forward, it's all politically correct.

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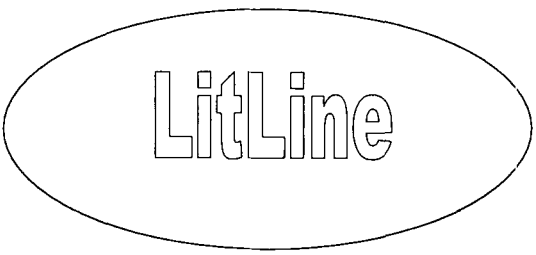

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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He has published nine books of poetry, most recently *Portrait of My Father in an English Landscape* (Oxford University Press, 1998). His new book, *The Budapest File*, poems on Hungarian themes and exile, is forthcoming from Bloodaxe. . . . ADAM THORPE* was born in Paris in 1956 to British parents and brought up in India, Cameroon and England. He has received awards for both his poetry and his novels. His most recent volume of poetry is *From the Neanderthal* (Cape, 1999).

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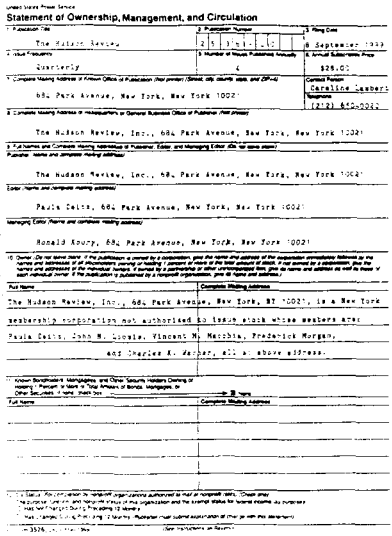

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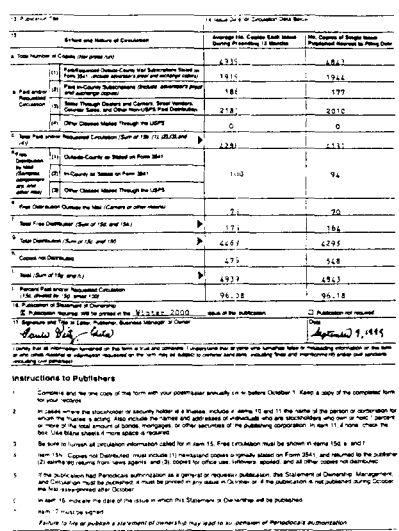

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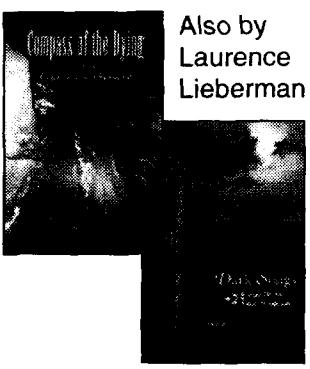

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[T]he special gift of [Edwin] Muir's poetry is that it reminds us of the possibility of a rooted life—"rooted" in all senses: geographical, ancestral, cultural, natural, spiritual. Muir was consistent in his romantic contempt for the modern idea of progress; he warned that, in a culture overdetermined by technological development, outward changes happen so fast that our primal identity becomes "indistinct. . . . [T]he imagination cannot pierce to it as easily as it once could." The constant metamorphosis of outer life brought about by technology obscures the essentials of human experience, which are remarkably consistent over time.

—Andrew Frisardi, "The Anomaly of Edwin Muir," p. 576.

In *Beowulf*, the dragon is the last and most complex of the three supernatural villains the hero must vanquish. Like Grendel's mother, the dragon has a legitimate grievance, at least in terms of a pagan value-system. It does not emerge from its fastness and assail the Geats without cause. It has lain quietly, harming no one, until disturbed by a thief. But its wrath and destructiveness are disproportionate to the offense that has provoked them. As hoard-guardian, enraged beyond measure by the loss of a single flagon, the dragon represents greed. Even Beowulf is not wholy immune to gold-lust. . . .

—Alan Sullivan, "The Translators' Tale or How Many Angles Can Dance on the Head of a Finn?", p. 587.

On the literary side, it is also salutary to note that poets from Chaucer to Wordsworth to Eliot have advocated a return to common speech against a perceived scleroticism in poetic language. It is also worth repeating that there have been no mute, inglorious Miltons in the provinces. Over the generations, poets as diverse as Dylan Thomas and R. S. Thomas (Wales), Edwin Muir and Douglas Dunn (Scotland) and Louis MacNeice and Paul Muldoon (Northern Ireland) have all become central reading. A further irony is that many of the critics and poets who claim to speak for marginalized voices were educated in the very places which they claim are the centers of cultural oppression. . . . Life does not preclude these writers wanting to satirize and criticize whatever they see as unjust, but let them not claim the same oppressions for themselves as the genuinely culturally and educationally disadvantaged.

—N. S. Thompson, "Here Comes Everybody: British Poetry Today," p. 597.

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